Contextual Safeguarding for the Youth Sector





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What is this guide and who is it for?

The resource provides guidance to support youth settings to use the ideas from Contextual Safeguarding and create safety for young people at risk of or experiencing[XP1] harm in their communities.

Youth settings refers to a broad and diverse sector, offering young people opportunities to socialise with each other, and learn and develop, in local community settings. Core principles of youth settings are rooted in voluntary engagement and relational and collective practice that is shaped by young people's agendas. Youth settings vary, for example, in relation to size, space, location and funding sources. Some settings see the same young people regularly, others work with young people for short periods; some have fixed settings and others are mobile and detached. Each organisation will therefore have different opportunities and challenges to use Contextual Safeguarding concepts and ideas. Contextual Safeguarding approaches and interventions may also look different for different youth settings.

It is important to note that the resource does not perceive youth settings as solely preventative provisions that should be designed to protect young people from extra familial harm (EFH). Rather, it recognises that youth settings as educative practices that are relational, voluntary and collaborative play an important role in the safety of young people. These values are well aligned to the ideas and values of Contextual Safeguarding. Whether they are a specialist service working with girls experiencing criminal exploitation or provide universal services, youth settings can provide protective spaces for young people beyond the family home.

This guide is designed to support all types of youth settings. Examples provided within the resource are drawn from the Contextual Safeguarding team's work with a range of youth settings. The resource provides an overview of Contextual Safeguarding and the youth sector and then is structured along three thematic areas in which the core principles of youth work support and align with a Contextual Safeguarding approach:

1. Working with friendships and peer groups (page 4)
2. Creating safe spaces (page 6)
3. Trust and relationships (page 8)

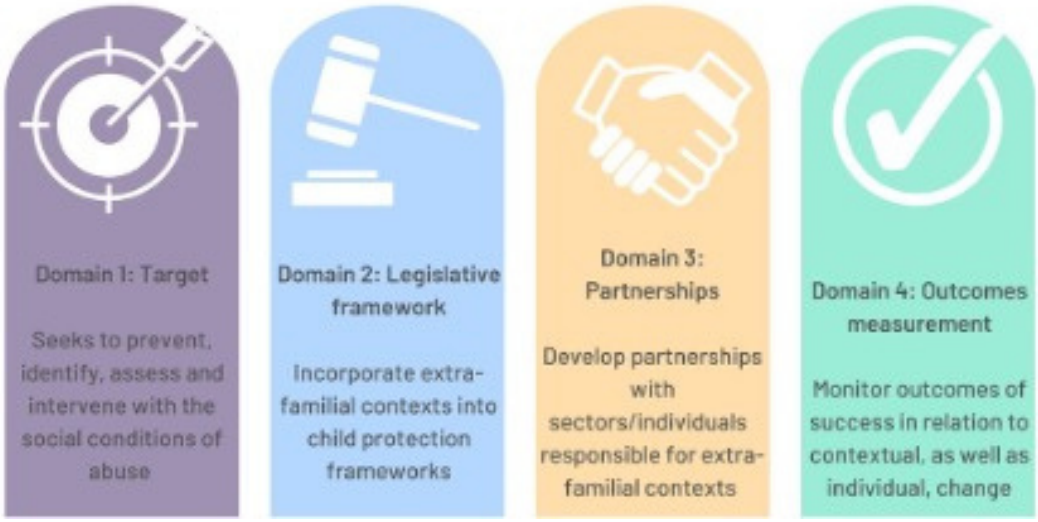
The resource contains examples and case studies of safeguarding practice that have been identified within or tested by youth settings working with the Contextual Safeguarding team at the University of Durham. It also contains ideas and suggestions which capture the impact youth settings have on groups and places, as well as on individual young people. Links to supplementary resources are provided throughout the guide to facilitate further reading and more detailed explanation and exploration of the three thematic areas.

1. What is Contextual Safeguarding?

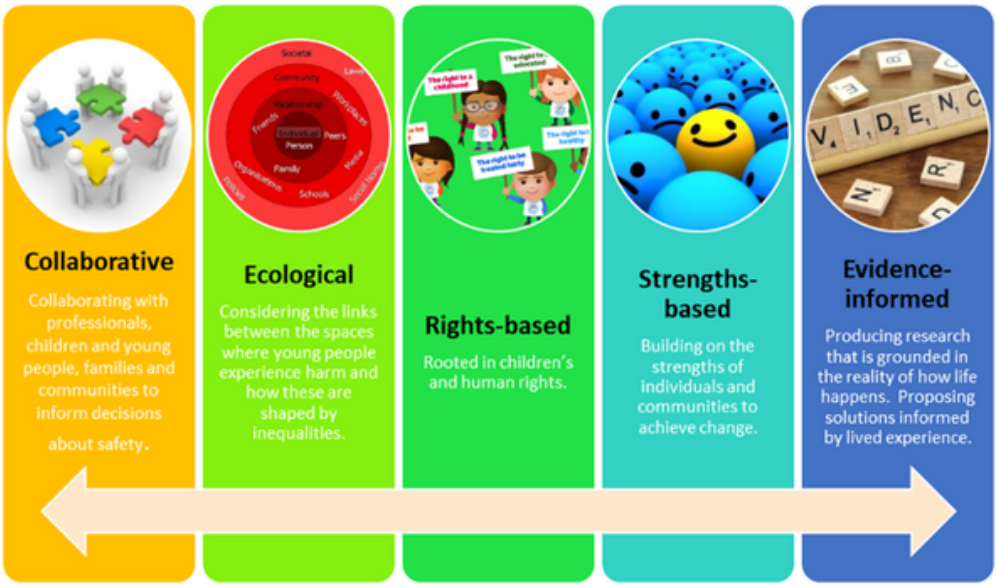
Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding adolescents that focuses on the contexts (spaces) in which harm happens. As young people get older, they start to spend more time outside of their homes and without their families - in contexts such as their peer groups, schools and their neighbourhoods. As these spaces become more significant, they are spaces where young people can experience safety, and where they can experience harm and abuse.

For an overview of Contextual Safeguarding watch this two-minute video.

To ensure our safeguarding activities recognise these important spaces in young people's lives Contextual Safeguarding is based on four 'domains'. These are:



Contextual Safeguarding is based on five values that help to ensure the approach we take to safeguarding young people in spaces beyond their homes is ethical and promotes children's rights to protection, privacy, and of association, as outlined in the UNCRC Importantly Contextual Safeguarding is about making spaces safer for all young people, including those who harm and those who have been harmed, and is not about excluding or punishing young people when things go wrong.



1.2 Contextual Safeguarding and the Youth Sector

In England, practice models for safeguarding are dominated by statutory services including social work and policing and to a lesser extent education (Williamson and Coussée, 2019, DfE, 2018). For youth settings statutory duties in relation to safeguarding include making referrals to children's social care, safe recruitment of staff, and safeguards around staff/volunteer and child relationships (DfE, 2018; Section 11 of the Children's Act 2004). Whilst these duties are critical in safeguarding young people and supporting statutory services, youth settings can play a more significant role in safeguarding young people from Extra familial harm (EFH).

Youth settings can, for example, provide a safe space for young people to access in their community; provide safe adult relationships for young people in spaces outside of their home; work with groups of young people to think collectively about their experiences, circumstances and wider structural inequalities; and work collaboratively with young people to create safety (Jeffs et al. 2019, Ord and Davies 2022). Youth settings are often able to engage young people at risk of or experiencing EFH by operating or have reaching into the places that young people spend their time.

The important role that youth settings play in safeguarding young people from EFH is highlighted in a parliamentary inquiry which indicates a link between rising cases of EFH and significant funding cuts to youth work (APPG, 2018).

The Contextual Safeguarding team has worked with youth settings to do Contextual Safeguarding in various ways:

Youth settings as a key partner in multi-agency teams:
we have worked with a range of sectors, including youth settings, to think about how multi-agency partners can work together to change harmful contexts. This Hymn Sheet Workshop resource, for example, can help multi-agency teams deliver responses to young people's extra-familial harm that are in line with Contextual Safeguarding. This podcast discusses integrating youth work with Contextual Safeguarding in health settings.

Using Contextual Safeguarding methods in youth settings to understand and assess safety and harm:
we have worked with youth settings to develop and use methods, such as safety mapping and planning exercises to assess EFH and the safety of young people and contexts.

Developing and leading Contextual Safeguarding interventions in youth settings:
we have worked with organisations to develop and pilot Contextual Safeguarding interventions in youth settings. For example, peer-led safeguarding interventions and youth outreach interventions.

Creating safe youth work organisations and spaces for young people in the community:
We have worked with youth work organisations to understand how different provisions can create safety within and around their organisation and safeguard young people from EFH beyond making referrals to Children's Social Care. The Towards Safety self-assessment tool is a resource to support youth work organisations to build safety within and around their organisation as a route to safeguarding young people from harm beyond their families. Also, the following blog and podcast by youth workers explore how youth work can do community-based safety work and how recreation sports cages can be used to create safety.

2. Working with friendships and peer groups

As young people move into adolescence their peers become more and more important to their lives. We know that adolescents can have a big influence on each other's decisions and actions, and that this can be a vital source of safety and development, as well as sometimes a source of risk for young people.

The Contextual Safeguarding team has worked with youth settings to develop ways of working with young people and their peers. This section shares some of that learning and includes links to a range of resources that can support you and your service to think about the importance of peer groups for adolescent safety.

Being mindful of the relationships between young people within your setting, and even understanding their relationships with other peers outside of your provision, can create important spaces to understand more about the lives of young people, their relationships, and the range of ways in which they are supported, or in some cases experiencing harm.

Case study – A peer-led intervention in a youth club!

Abianda are a social enterprise that works with young women who they describe as 'affected by gangs and county lines'. Participation is a core principle of Abianda's work. Together with young women, they developed a peer-led intervention that was developed and delivered with youth facilitators who acted as peer mentors to other young women at a youth club. The peer mentors had benefited from similar work, and felt the younger women at the youth club would also benefit from supported conversations about the issues affecting them. The youth facilitators engaged younger peers at a youth club in conversations about emotions, relationships and safety concerns, and supported them to seek support from peers and professionals.

By delivering the youth-led mentoring at the youth club, Abianda, the youth mentors (who were from the area) and the young women who were receiving the support were able to get to talk about the specific context of the youth club, the area it was in and the issues impacting young women in that area. Abianda used resources from the Contextual Safeguarding website to help them do this work.

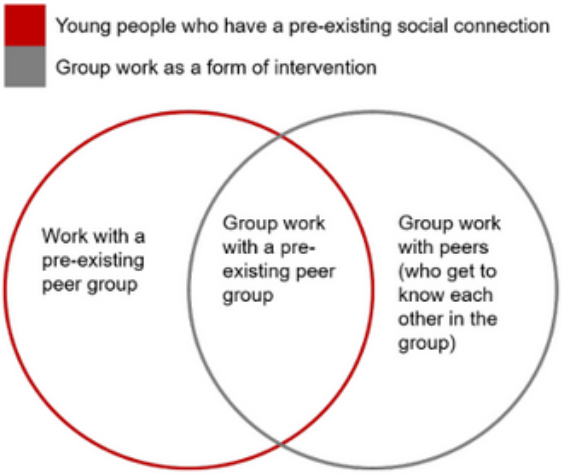
The youth mentors and the young women who were mentored all benefitted from the work, the youth mentors were provided with references and vouchers to renumerate their time.

Key considerations to support this work were:

- Identifying follow-up opportunities to offer young people continued support
- Be flexible and open to adjusting and adapting as you go, be led by young people's needs
- Value the expertise of young people and let them lead
- Prepare and train youth mentors to think about their different roles, boundaries and skill development
- You can listen to a 12-minute podcast and read a short case study about this work here.

2.1 Different ways of working with peers in youth settings

There are different ways of working with peers in youth settings (see below for some examples). Sometimes professionals are worried about bringing young people together who are experiencing similar forms of harm, or perhaps where there is conflict between them or their friends. This must always be assessed by the people who know them best, however there are benefits to bringing young people together who have shared experiences, and there are different ways of doing this. You may work with a young person 1:1 but create space to talk to them about their relationships; or you may choose to bring the young people who work with together with their friends to do a piece of work about an issue that is impacting them; you can also bring together a group of young people who don't know each other, but who get to know each other through the work. The group work can focus specifically on issues related to safety or it could be based around more universal activities that help to build relationships of trust and communication between young people and their peers.

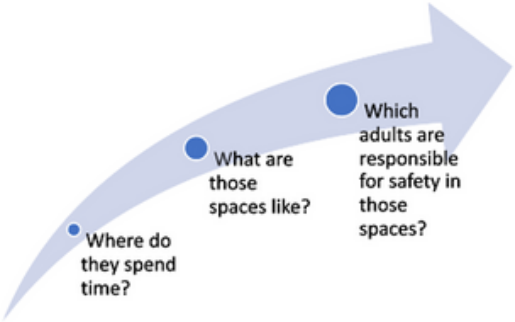




Read more about peer interventions here.

Thinking about peer groups in context

It is important to remember that peer groups are influenced by their social settings, just like individuals are. If you identify that there are issues impacting a peer group that you are working with, it is good to start by asking:



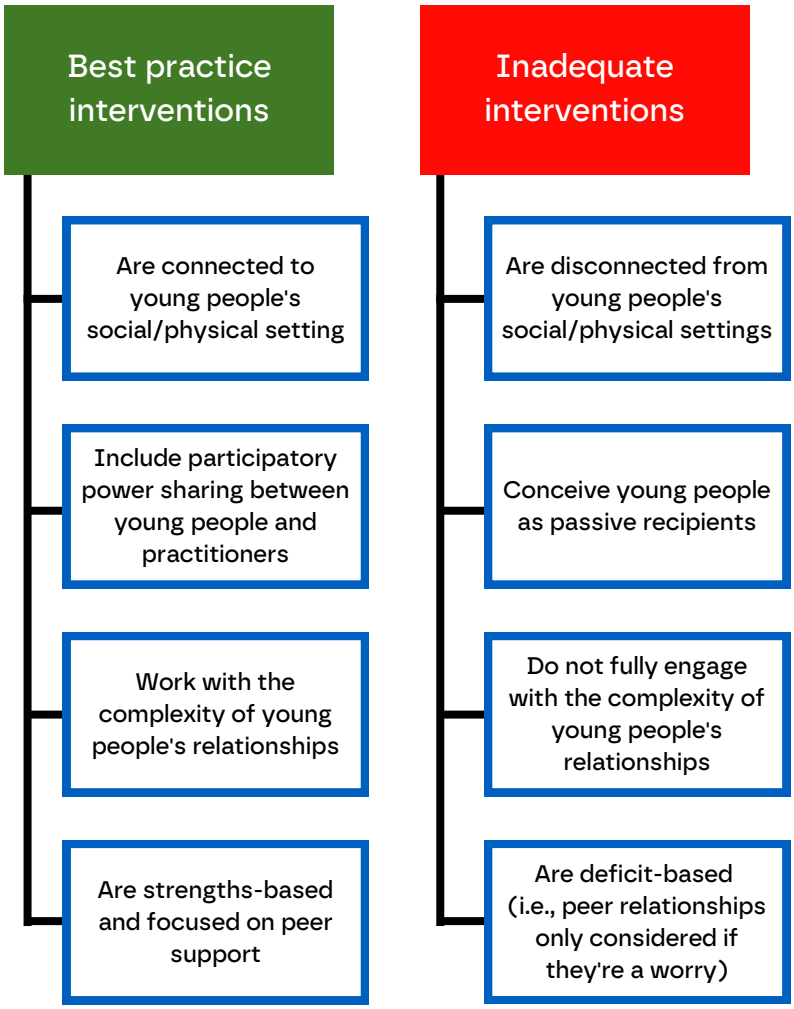
For example, if you are working with several young people who are all experiencing problems at the same school it is important to have ways of recognising and recording this, and of talking to young people about sharing your concerns with the school. It could be that the school needs support to keep these young people safe, and you might be able to play an important role in that. Remember, the focus of Contextual Safeguarding is always on making the space safer for all young people, it is not about excluding young people from spaces or punishing them when they are harmed or harm.

2.2 Principles of working with peers

When working with peers it is important to remember that peers are a source of safety, to intervene in the spaces where peers spend time and to design interventions that are collaborative and actively involve young people. See the green examples in the diagram for some principles of working with peers.

A note on information sharing!

As with all work with young people, the Safer London practitioner will explain that they would have to share information from the sessions if they become worried about anyone's safety. This enables young people to make an informed decision about what they disclose. A young person may choose to share information about a peer they are worried about precisely because they want a professional intervention. Equally, they may be worried about getting peers into trouble by telling professionals about them.



3. Creating safe spaces

> “ … going to a youth club, this is the one place you’re supposed to feel secure, you’re supposed to act the way you act truly, your true form. You do not want to feel confined, it’s not after school club, it’s a space where you can relax and offload ”
>
> – Young Person, Interview

Adolescence is a period in human development where we have an increased desire for autonomy and to socialise and form relationships in extra-familial contexts away from parental supervision (Firmin 2020; Blakemore 2018). Young people want to be able to socialise with their friends in spaces outside of their home environment. It is therefore crucial that we create safe communities for young people to live in.

Youth settings were often discussed as places of safety by young people (Millar, Walker & Whittington, 2023). They are places that young people choose to attend voluntarily, where they can go and meet friends and have contact with safe adults in a community. They might be the only service young people are engaging with. Young people may also be exposed to a range of interpersonal harms within, and outside of, youth settings. When such harm occurs youth settings can play a role in safeguarding the welfare of those young people. This role can extend beyond referring young people affected to statutory services.

For more, check out this briefing on peer support interventions in the youth sector

3.1 Creating safe youth settings

Research carried out by the Contextual Safeguarding team explored how youth settings created safety and responded to EFH in and around their provision. The research identified four key interlocking areas that settings should pay attention to when thinking about creating safety. These are:

1. Cultural Context: the social norms within organisations amongst staff and young people that work to promote safety, as well as those that are harmful and act to undermine safety
2. Structures and Systems: the processes and mechanisms in place to support safety for all young people
3. Identification: the ability of staff (including volunteers and young leaders) to identify EFH and the conditions that enable harm to occur
4. Response and Intervention: the availability, use and effectiveness of responses and interventions following incidents of EFH.

3. Creating safe spaces

Key questions to consider when creating safe environments are:

Cultural Context

- Do you provide an inclusive space that promotes young people's participation, trust, choice, and rights? Is safeguarding embedded within your practice?
- Do you respond so that harm is not normalised in your organisation?
- Do you have a proportionate and consistent response to extra-familial harm?
- Do you advocate for young people's needs and rights, and take a strengths-based approach towards working with young people and the community?

Example: One setting wanted to make their youth work organisation more LGBTQ+ inclusive and representative. In doing so, youth workers collaborate with young people to identify how best to create and sustain that culture.

Structures and Systems

- Do you have a set or sets of youth-led or co-produced rules that are collectively agreed upon, outlining what is expected and the ways of working?
- Do you proactively identify and respond to emerging concerns that impact young people in the community?
- Do you have safeguarding structures and systems that maintain a proportional level of flexibility?
- Do you have a shared understanding and application of thresholds for different points of intervention?
- Do you have thoughtful policy and procedure development related to EFH that are reflective of the service, the ethos, needs and lived experiences of the young people who engage with your organisation?

Example: A youth club had a set of rules displayed on their walls that apply to everyone participating in that organisation. These rules were coproduced with young people and adults in the setting.

Identification

- Do staff form trusted relationships with young people that maximise young people's choice and voice and are aware of, and sensitive to, the power dynamics within the relationships?
- Do you understand the conditions in which identification of harm and help-seeking is more likely, and are you prepared to support young people and staff when this happens?
- Do you offer knowledge, training and support which reflects what staff and volunteers say they require?
- Do staff have knowledge of extra-familial harm trends within and around your organisation?

Example: A youth setting with a small staff team and a low turnover of staff was aware of the EFH trends in their organisation through experiences of identifying and responding to incidents over time. These informal structures were then supported by weekly staff meetings where recent EFH trends were discussed and recorded.

Response and Intervention

- Are responses to incidents proportionate, contextual, trauma-informed and welfare-led?
- Are responses to incidents focused on de-escalation – reducing something that is going wrong?
- Are responses guided by restorative/transformative and relational principles - building something that is positive?
- Do you offer formal spaces for staff to reflect and debrief following incidents of extra-familial harm?

Example: A youth setting had a situation where a young person told a youth worker that they were going to carry a knife for their protection. The youth worker provided a space for the young person to discuss what reasons they felt they needed to carry a knife, where and why they felt unsafe and worked with the young person and partner organisations to develop a plan to make them safer.

3.2 Working with young people to think about safe communities

Case study – safety mapping

Adam, 13 years old, presented at the local hospital after being assaulted at school by another student in his class.

A youth practitioner worked with Adam to carry out a safety mapping exercise. The practitioner used a scale of 1-10 with 1 being very unsafe and 10 being very safe. They asked Adam how safe he felt at home and at school and Adam gave himself a 10 for both.

They then asked how safe Adam felt on his way to and from school and he gave himself a 4/10 as his bus goes through the other student's area and they have older brothers who Adam was worried about. Adam and the youth practitioner spoke about taking a different route to school; Adam decided that walking to school and avoiding the area completely would be safest for him. The youth practitioner asked how safe Adam felt in other areas of the borough, and he said he can't go to certain areas because of where he is from.

The youth practitioner asked what did he do in that situation, he said he ran home. The youth practitioner and Adam spoke about going into a local shop where he could call his Mum. Adam was interested in football and basketball and having something to do after school as he was just 'hanging out' around his local area. The youth practitioner identified a Youth Club within a 'safe' area and easy to get to. Adam wanted to go to youth club and the youth practitioner and Adam went together for Adam's first visit; they mapped out the journey which Adam felt safe to do by himself.

(Case study courtesy of Redthread.)

As well as acting as safe places in the community for young people to spend their time, youth settings can also play a key role in understanding how safe communities are for young people. The ability of youth settings to engage young people and to work flexibly and participatory mean that these organisations are well placed to work with young people to identify harm and safety in the community. Youth settings can, for example, carry out safety planning and safety mapping exercises with young people to identify places of safety and harm in the community.

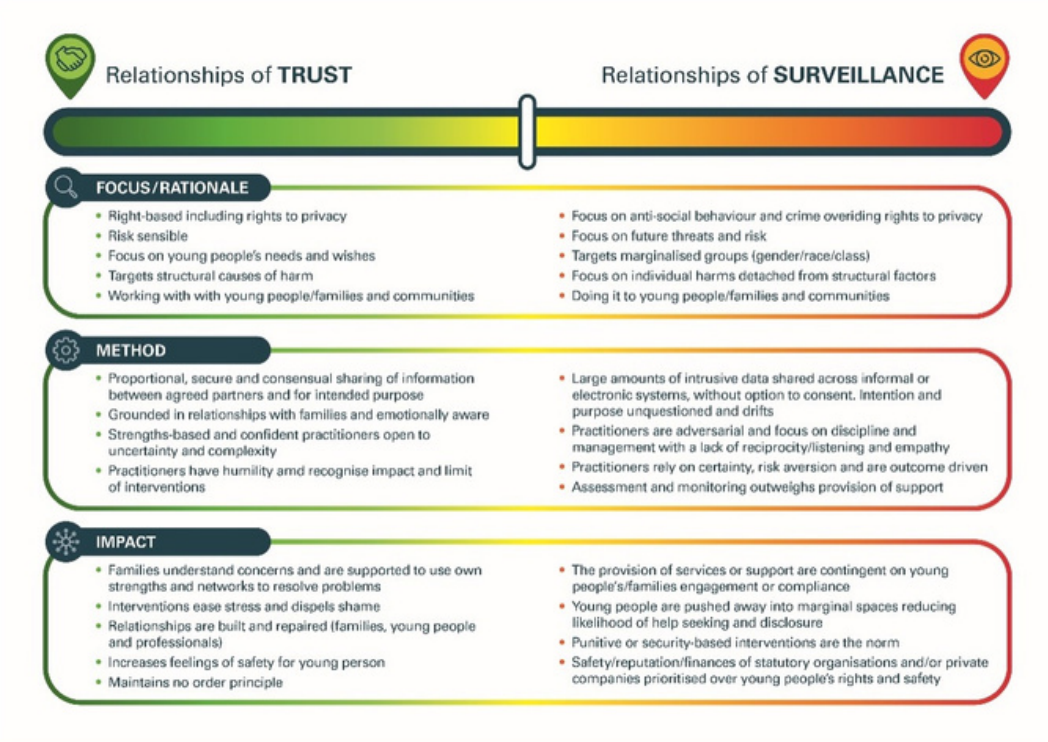
This webinar provides six steps that practitioners can take when safety mapping as part of a Contextual Safeguarding approach.

4. Trust and relationships

Understanding and building on positive and trusted relationships is key to Contextual Safeguarding. Young people tell us that relationships are crucial for their safety and that breaches of trust and lack of confidentiality can be major barriers for engaging with services or support.

We developed a tool to help you think about the sorts of relationships you are forming with young people in your work. The tool invites you to think about:

- What is the focus of your intervention with young people and what is the rationale?
- What method or approach are you using?
- What is the impact of the work on young people, their families and the wider community?



Trusted relationships are a key enabler of Contextual Safeguarding in youth settings. The following extract is from the Toward Safety self-audit resource for the youth sector which you can access in full here.

DESCRIPTION	ENABLER	BARRIER
Trusted Relationships and Power	**Do staff form trusted relationships with young people that maximise young people's choice and voice; and are aware of, and sensitive to, the power dynamics within the relationships?** Processes are aimed at levelling power within staff-young people's relationships, and creating relatability is promoted. Your organisation is sensitive to, and aware of, how power manifests in young people-staff relationships. In organisations that have a more formal hierarchy, staff power is acknowledged and barriers to forming relationships are recognised and addressed, ensuring that processes are put in place to promote young people's choice and voice. Similarly, in organisations that strive for shared power between staff and young people, the power held by staff is acknowledged - for example, as gatekeepers for the organisation and through their safeguarding duties. Transparency forms a key element of trusted relationships where young people are regularly informed about the limits of confidentiality and staff safeguarding duties so that they can make fully informed decisions about sharing information and disclosures.	Staff-young people hierarchies act as a barrier to relationship building and result in young people feeling unheard and unable to seek support or help from staff. These barriers are not acknowledged and go unaddressed. Strong trusted relationships are formed between young people and staff, however a lack of transparency undermines trusted relationships where young people are not regularly informed about the limits of confidentiality and safeguarding duties. Young people are therefore not able to make fully informed decisions about sharing information and disclosures.

This Contextual Safeguarding podcast contains important views from young people about information sharing and trust. In this podcast young people tell us they want to speak to people who:

- Care about what they're going through and aren't obliged to be there.
- They can trust.
- Don't give them unwanted advice.
- Have had similar experiences to them (including people who are their friends).

Importantly, youth workers were identified by young people as the people they want to talk to because they are more on a level with young people, have more trust and are less likely to do things like automatically call the police or report young people to other agencies. Similarly, young people have told us that they want more youth services where they can go and hang out – youth services are identified by young people as integral to safety!

Case study: Relational Practice

Asif was referred to a local youth setting due to concerns of drug dealing within his educational setting and for being arrested outside the city, where a knife was found in his possession. He had been missing several times and professionals were worried about his safety, the safety of others, and risks he faced of exploitation, 'serious youth violence' and trafficking. Asif lived at home with his mother and siblings. While his home was assessed by social workers as 'protective', Asif's mother wanted support to keep her son safe; often not knowing his whereabouts and feeling unable to keep him at home.

On receiving a referral about Asif, before making contact, the youth setting considered Asif's inner-world. Being curious about Asif in this way from the offset gave space for Ali, his allocated worker, to build a meaningful relationship with him; rather than solely focussing on risk reduction. Ali was interested in understanding Asif; what were his interests, drivers and ambitions? How were the current concerns impacting him and his well-being. The intervention model was not time-limited.

Initial engagement with Asif presented challenges; he was fearful of the support, and was 'pulled' by those who were harming him. Assertive outreach in the form of flexible appointments, persistency, paying him close attention and high levels of practical support all helped Asif and Ali connect. Asif enjoyed cycling, so this became their regular activity. Feeling relaxed, conversation was more natural and less probing/pressured – this opened up conversations about relationships and safety and began to form a picture of Asif's different contexts. Ali revisited the confidentiality policy with Asif as disclosures were made and this helped to protect the trusted relationship. In times of crisis Asif accessed the service with his friends and made contact with Ali during his 'missing' periods. Over time, Asif and Ali's relationship strengthened, due to its consistent, reliable and protective nature, leading to increased stability in Asif's world.

The case study was adapted from: Relationship-based practice and Contextual Safeguarding Key Messages for Practice

5. Conclusion

Youth settings have a key role to play in Contextual Safeguarding:

- The Domains and Values of the Contextual Safeguarding align with the values and aims of the youth sector.
- Youth workers and youth settings are well placed to have reach into the spaces where young people spend their time.
- The youth sector has an important role that is independent from statutory services; this is something that is valued by young people and that supports their safety – fostering trusted relationships and creative ways of working that have a greater degree of time and flexibility.

The Toward Safety Wheel has been designed specifically for the youth sector as self-assessment resource to support you to build safety within your organisation for young people affected by extra-familial harm.

References

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Resources

The information and resources in this briefing are taken from the Contextual Safeguarding Network which can be accessed for free here.

Peers:

The content in the peers section has been adapted from the following Contextual Safeguarding resources:

- Safer London Peers Project | Contextual Safeguarding
- SPOTLIGHT 3 : Developing a peer-led intervention with peer mentors at a youth club | Contextual Safeguarding
- For a range of resources for working with peers see Search | Contextual Safeguarding and listen to young people talking about their peers and safety here: The Contextual Safeguarding Young People's Podcast Series | Contextual Safeguarding

Safe Spaces:

The content in this section has been adapted from the following resources:

- Towards-safety-self-assessment-full-guidance.pdf (contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)
- Safety planning with young people at Redthread | Contextual Safeguarding

Relationships:

The content in the trusted relationships section has been adapted from the following resources:

- Relationship-based-practice-and-contextual-safeguarding.pdf (contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)
- Watching Over Working With | Contextual Safeguarding
- Relationship-based practice and Contextual Safeguarding Key Messages for Practice (2020) by Rachael Owens, Gillian Ruch, Carlene Firmin, Hannah Millar, Ella Remes.

Glossary

Safeguarding – action taken to promote the welfare of children and to protect them from harm.

Adolescents – young people aged between 10-24 years.

Youth settings – refers to all youth work organisations and activities mentioned under the National Youth Guarantee (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2022). It includes a diverse range of activities and provisions that are both universal and targeted and that vary in relation to size, space, location and funding sources.

Extra-familial harm (EFH) – harm that takes place outside of the home.

Contexts – spaces where young people spend their time when they're not at home.

Contextual Safeguarding – an approach to safeguarding that focuses on the contexts where harm happens.

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