

A young person facing criminal exploitation

This case study shows how building a trusting relationship with a young person can help to build safety in their friendships and community. It started in a meeting, where workers talked about a group of young people they were worried about. One of the young people they talked about was Asif, a 14 year old boy. The workers were worried that he was being criminally exploited by older adults. Asif had been arrested with a large amount of drugs. They were worried because it was a lot of drugs and they thought he might be being exploited to sell them.

What was the response?

Asif was given a child and family social worker called Jo. Jo sat within a specialist Contextual Safeguarding team who were trained at supporting young people at risk of extra-familial harm.

Jo felt the most important thing was to increase Asif's safety. To do this she felt it was really important that she could build a relationship with Asif so that he would trust her. This might help Asif to talk about the things he cared about and what he needed to be safe. Jo was able to build a relationship because she had the time to get to know Asif.

As Asif started to open up, he told Jo that he had been attacked and had drugs stolen from him. This meant he had got a 'drug debt'. The adult who gave him the drugs said that he could pay off his debt by selling more drugs. Asif also said that he was scared to talk about who it was, and to say anything to the police because of what might happen to him.

Different things happened to try to keep Asif safe, these included:

- Jo began to build a relationship with Asif by supporting him to find positive things to do that he liked e.g. education and training rather than focusing on drug-related activities
- A National Referral Mechanism referral was made which described the risk of violence and the extent of exploitation Asif was experiencing. This referral named the adult that had threatened him about the drug debt
- A referral was made to a project within the police-led youth and early intervention team, a specialist team helping to divert young people from the criminal justice system
- Partnership work with the police involved disruption activity to try to stop the people exploiting Asif

What were the challenges?

Initially, police communication with the Contextual Safeguarding team was poor. A raid on Asif's family home significantly impacted the relationship between Asif and Jo, because he thought she had broken his confidence. As the work progressed, Asif became increasingly socially isolated because his main support network were his friends who were also involved in exploitation.

What difference did this make?

Jo persisted in her relationship with Asif. It was hard at first, but when Jo showed that she cared about him - and wanted to get to know him - Asif started to feel he could trust her more. Jo continued to make time for visiting him at home and she was supported by her managers to do that. Although learning about the exploitation wasn't the aim of the work, Asif did start to talk to Jo about this. Jo also learnt about the positive people in Asif's life. This meant that Jo gained the support of someone from his extended family who helped Asif access work experience. Several months later, Jo and Asif worked on applications for apprenticeships.

Police partners worked hard to maintain a child-centred approach to working with Asif. Asif's involvement with the 'early intervention project' helped him to build positive associations with the police. The six-month project provided Asif with positive support and signposting to other services, based on what he said he needed. Asif then built a trusting relationship with police workers. Asif continued to spend time with them after the planned work finished.

With Asif's consent and knowledge, the Contextual Safeguarding team passed on the information Asif provided regarding the adults he 'owed' money. A key adult in the drug distribution network was tracked through mobile phone technology and arrested for possession. This disrupted the drug distribution chain and reduced Asif's risk of continued exploitation and threats of violence.

What did we learn?

The case study shows how important it is to build trusting relationships with young people. Building a positive relationship was the aim of this and not the disruption of the exploitation, although this happened alongside.

The Contextual Safeguarding team focused on having a welfare-led, rather than a punitive, way of working with young people that were being criminally exploited. When more punitive measures were used, such as the police raid, the case began to break down. Police involvement in the case was effective when they began to adopt a welfare approach, by working in close partnership with the Contextual Safeguarding team. This helped to lessen the barriers between Asif and the police.

The quality and focus of the relationships between Asif and workers was very important here. These relationships helped Jo, his social worker, to learn more about the contextual dynamics of the exploitation and focus on stopping the harm, rather than changing Asif's behaviour.

Contextualising the information helped workers to focus on the harm outside the family home that Asif was facing. They were able to understand the dynamics of his case (e.g. the drug debt), identify the nature of harm and risk (i.e. risk of reprisals) and how best to respond to this (e.g. through disruption methods targeting adults in the drug distribution network). The contextual information in this case was largely provided by Asif, which shows how important it is to speak with young people about their experiences. Asif co-produced an anonymised presentation for the police project, based on his experiences and how he was drawn into criminal exploitation. The presentation is used as an educative tool to stop further exploitation of young people.