

Reflections on using the peer assessment tool in child and family assessments

In this Spotlight feature Derrick Osinde, Senior Social Worker in an Adolescent Team in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, shares his reflections on using the [peer assessment tool](#) to support child and family assessments, corresponding to a [‘Level 1’](#) of Contextual Safeguarding.

About Derrick

I am a Senior Social Worker based in an Adolescent Team working with teenagers affected by exploitation (youth violence, criminal exploitation, Modern Slavery and child sexual exploitation). In Barking and Dagenham, we have been piloting the use of the [peer assessment tool](#), developed in Hackney, to help consider peer relationships and dynamics within our individual assessments for young people. We use the peer assessment tool to support young people who are experiencing significant extra-familial harm. We work with a number of agencies who also work with children at risk of exploitation (National Referral Mechanism, Rescue and Response and Safer London). Our partners benefit from us having a good understanding of the young person’s current location, who they might be with, and the risk presented to them. At times, using the peer assessment tool and peer mapping has helped us to locate young people and safeguard them from harm.

When dealing with extra-familial harm, I find the peer assessment tool vital to assessing and managing risk and safety planning with children and families. When completing social work assessments, it encourages me to look beyond assessing parenting capacity and the parents/carers’ ability to manage the risks outside the home. We know that parents/carers may have limited reach in the contexts where their child might be experiencing harm.

Why do we conduct peer assessments?

In Barking and Dagenham, we use the peer assessment tool for the following purposes:

Understanding connections and dynamics of peer relationships

We look at the how young people spend their time in their environments, considering the type of friends they have (background, engagement with education, offending history, affiliations and behaviour in the community) and what brings the group together. For example, whether they all attend the same school/PRU or shared experiences of being/having been in care. They may live on the same housing estate, come from the same country or may have parents/carers who share a close relationship. They may have difficult relationships with one or both of their parents/carer, have experienced loss, separation and other forms of trauma.

Having knowledge of the peer group helps with assessing the level of risk presented to young people by helping us to understand why conflicts may have occurred as well as the risk of retaliation or further violence. It can help us understand who in the group has the most influence and why. This helps us to see where our young person fits in the group and to hypothesise about what they gain from being part of the group. The peer assessment tool also supports us to understand who the young person's safe friendships are so that we can build on identified safe and supportive relationships.

Understanding young people's experiences in online spaces

We assess young people and parents/carers' understanding of the risk online, considering, for example, young people's online presence, their identity and experience of the online world. Who are their online 'friends' and who are the people they follow (adults or children)? Who do they identify with online and how does this influence their behaviour online and in the community? Does the young person or their group of friends share personal information online and what risks does that highlight? What sort of things are the group sharing/posting and how do their peers behave online?

Improving parents/carers' understanding of young people's relationships

We look at how parents/carers understand issues in the community and how they see these issues impacting young people, as well as their knowledge of who their children spend their time with (adults and peers) and where. We incorporate this information into our assessments and use the peer assessment tool as a guide to talk to parents/carers about who their children spend time with, where they go and what the risks are in those environments.

Informing safety profiling and planning

We use the information gathered through the peer assessment to tailor our safety plans and interventions to the young person's needs and build safety in the community and online. We have discussions with young people and their parents/carers about what realistic steps they can each take to improve safety in these environments. Safety planning enables us to be clear with parents/carers about our concerns for their child and the role that their peer associations might have in this.

Contextualising the young person's experience

When describing the young person's lived experience, we include contextual information about the local community and the young people's peer relationships. We talk about the influence and impact of both on the child. We speak about how the young person sees themselves within their friendship circle as well as within their community. When we discuss cases in supervision, we use the peer assessment tool to weigh up the risks in the community and within the peer group.

Who do we speak to as part of the assessment?

Whilst it is important to hear directly from young people about their friendships and peer relationships, they may not always feel willing or able to share this with a social worker and we need to take time to build their trust. I therefore gather relevant information for the peer assessment through a range of sources.

The young person

During direct work with children, it is important to talk to them about who their friends are, where they met, why they maintain/value the friendship and what similarities they share. This can tell you a lot about how the young person sees themselves and the world they live in. It can help to better understand how they benefit from their peer relationships and help you to understand the dynamics of the group. It helps to explore this from a strengths-based perspective and frame it around support, rather than focus solely on risks.

Parents/carers

Speaking to parent/carers about their children's friends can help practitioners better understand who their friends are. It is important to know what they think about their children's friends and the relationship they have with them. This can also help practitioners gauge the levels of supervision their children receive.

Siblings

Speaking to siblings can be very helpful as they sometimes have knowledge of what is happening in their sibling's lives/friendships and often feel protective and supportive of their sibling. Some children have particular family members they confide in or can approach to speak about things that are worrying them. Finding out who the young person approaches can also be very helpful in getting a picture of the trusted adults and friends in their life and their influence upon the young person.

Partnership information

I find that reviewing records within the department and speaking to professionals is always helpful. For example, in my work a lot of young people or their friends are known to the Youth Offending Service, who tend to have a lot of information about groups and what activities they are, or are suspected to be, involved in. This approach can be extended to all professionals working with the child or who have recently worked with the child. For example, professionals from health, education, local youth club providers, religious leaders, or local voluntary services.

In addition, reviewing Police Merlins and information shared by other agencies (family members, health, education, the police and other professionals) can tell you a lot about peer relationships and connections. It is important however to be mindful that different agencies might have different views and we should always question assumptions that can be made about peer relationships.

Local knowledge

Really understanding the community you work in can be very helpful. For social workers, understanding the issues the community faces on a daily basis can help understand the young person and their group of friends. It can help you to better understand the 'issues' for the group (such as fear of being a victim of youth violence, racism, being bullied, making money, fleeing poverty, religious identity, protection from gangs or being from a minority in the local community). It can help you consider what bonds the group together, how the group wants to present itself, and how it presents to others, the behaviours of young people in the group, what young people want to achieve as a group, and the social norms and play.

Some key considerations

Including peer assessments in Social Work assessments can be challenging for a number of reasons.

Preparation

When using the Peer Assessment, I have found that preparing prior to starting the Assessment is very helpful to moving the process forward. If the social worker is able to build conversations based on information they have gathered, it is easier for the young person to engage with the Peer Assessment.

Creating a safe space

One of the challenges in my role is that a lot of the children are being exploited by adults or groups that use power and fear to control young people. This makes it extremely difficult for some speak freely. As social workers we often work alongside the police and the Youth Justice System and this might also make young people more reluctant to open up to us. I have found that one way of overcoming this challenge is building a good relationship with young people and being open and honest with them about the information you already have available to you. In my view, this helps young people to be more forthcoming and helps them to understand the concerns around their safety and general wellbeing. So, an important part of the process is to consider with the young person where the Peer Assessment takes place and how it starts off. I have found that the young person must be in a safe space that allows them to feel comfortable to speak about their friends and life in the community or online. For many young people the information being asked of them relates to their private life and personal or intimate relationships so it is important to enable them to speak in language they understand and feel comfortable using. I believe that this always allows young people to engage in a way that does not require them to think about what their sharing.

Trust and proportionality

I find that using the Peer Assessment tool can inform the recovery process and should be treated with appropriate sensitivity. Young people can find it difficult to go through the whole assessment in one sitting or to share such information on demand; especially when their peer relationships are complex, unpredictable or harmful. I have found the tool extremely effective when completed over several sessions/meetings with young person; this helps to build trust and allows the young person to share what they want at their own pace.

Family knowledge

I have found that speaking to parents and siblings can be powerful; as they are observing their child or sibling and can see the changes in their behaviour when they are with their friends. However, one of the challenges is that sometimes parents genuinely do not know who their children's friends are and do not allow them in their homes. Sometimes siblings are too young to know the friends their brothers or sister keep. In some cases, parents and/or siblings might not show much interest in the young person's relationships.

Information sharing

Poor recording can sometimes be an issue. At times relevant information is not shared within new referrals or updates provided to the social worker. For example, sometimes the police

may arrest young people without sharing details of who they were with upon arrest, even when the level of risk presented to a young person or a group is very high. This can lead to delays and gaps in information unless the social worker requests this information to strengthen our Assessments, Peer Assessments and mapping work.

The impact of conducting peer assessments

This new way of working has been very helpful when supporting young people to consider and break away from negative influences in their friendship circle or in the community. It helps young people to think about their life outside the home and supports them to openly talk about the relationships they value and why. Peer assessments can be reviewed with young people and updated as their friendship circles change. It can also help us as professionals to rule beliefs and assumptions about their peer group out.

Overtime, I have seen young people question their previous beliefs and opinions as well as use their friend's experiences as examples that they do not wish to follow. In my view, engaging in a peer assessment has helped young people in their recovery journey and has helped them to reassess their core values and beliefs. For example, attempting to refrain from the use of violence or realising that their friends influence how they perceive conflict in the community or online.

I have similarly found that engaging in a peer assessment helps parents/carers to think about who and what influences their child (in the community, within the family, extended family and online). It allows parents/carers to speak to their kids about their relationships and how they spend their time outside the home. By providing parents/carers with a better understanding of how their child's relationships, and how they perceive danger and safety outside of the home, the peer assessment tool enables these conversations to happen in an open and honest way. In my experience of using the tool, it also helps parents to put safety measures around what their children do in the community as well as consider what positive activities they can support their child to engage with.

Finally, using the peer assessment has provided information that on occasions has helped professionals to safeguard other young people in the community. At times, the information gathered in this process has highlighted people or places that pose a danger to our young people. This information is shared with police and steps have been taken to arrest or disrupt the negative activities in our community (hotspots for crime, weapon stashes, chop shops or an address used to store or sell drugs).

Next steps

I have not had the opportunity to use the peer assessment in a group setting. I believe this would be very useful when working with a group of friends as they can all share their views. It would also allow the social worker the opportunity to see how the group communicate and engage in real time. This would give a good picture of the group dynamics and provide a safe space for a fuller and rich discussion about their values and beliefs as a group of friends.