

Singing from the same hymn sheet? What happens when multi-agency partners apply Contextual Safeguarding?

Owens & Lloyd (2023)

This briefing is based on the findings of Owens and Lloyd's (2023) research article 'From behaviour-based to ecological: multi-agency partnership responses to extra-familial harm' published in the Journal of Social Work. It is supported by an infographic and workshop activity.

Background

Serious case reviews and inquiries into harm to adolescents often highlight a failure in multi-agency working – people didn't work together, or didn't share enough, or at the right time. To reflect this, English statutory safeguarding policy asks "partner organisations and agencies [to] collaborate, share and co-own the vision for how to achieve improved outcomes for vulnerable children" (Department for Education, 2018).

Alongside this, when children get harmed outside their homes (like being criminally exploited or experiencing violence), social workers are now being asked to treat these as safeguarding issues. They are asked to create safety by working in community contexts, where the harm takes place. Traditionally, working in the community has been the responsibility of crime-prevention partners like the police or community safety; social workers did not get involved. Changes to policy in England, Scotland and Wales all talk about the need for social workers to lead statutory safeguarding work alongside other partners. So, we now have partnerships formed to address harm in the community, made up of social workers, the police, community safety, youth workers and education. In other words, we have partnerships between people with different levels of expertise and experience of working in the community, and agencies who have very different focuses for their work – from crime prevention to meeting the welfare needs of children.

There is a lot of power in these new partnerships that are connecting work in new places. But there are also challenges of bringing together different professionals and agencies who think and work in different ways. Despite growing calls to 'work together' we don't always acknowledge the challenges this can bring. How can social care act as a lead agency and work with partners who might have different priorities, values, histories and philosophies?

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to creating safety for children who experience harm in their communities. Although its value-base is rooted in a social care commitment to the welfare needs of young people, Contextual Safeguarding encourages social workers to build new partnerships with other organisations and people who live and work in the community.

Contextual Safeguarding practitioners work in neighbourhoods, schools and with peer groups to change the environment to reduce harm. They do not try to change the behaviour of young people or the parenting they receive. Instead, a distinctive aspect of Contextual Safeguarding is that practitioners try to understand and then target the social conditions of abuse in a context. This is an ecological approach. It's different from the dominant approach in many services and organisations, which are broadly behaviour-based.

Contextual Safeguarding uptake has been rapid. Practitioners have been keen to work in places outside the home. But the idea of needing to do this by changing the social conditions has been less understood. The result of this is we see safeguarding responses that target a context outside the home, but which still focus on changing the behaviour of the young people being harmed. This does not fit with a Contextual Safeguarding approach.

What does being ecological or behaviour-based mean?

These terms refer to how different people see social problems. An ecological approach considers social problems to be the result of the way that society is structured and the environments that people live in. For example, how things like discrimination and inequality limit some people's access to money, opportunities, status etc. as well as the influence of others around them. On the other hand, a behaviour-based approach sees social problems as resulting from the choices that individuals make.

You might think social problems are made up of a combination of what happens in the environment and the individual choices of those involved. But, in safeguarding work, often without realising it, we tend to lean towards one or the other, depending on different factors and assumptions. For example, we might say that an 8-year-old was being exploited to carry drugs and look at how we could change the environment around her, but with a 17-year-old, we would be more likely to say they are making a choice. We don't often stop to think about these assumptions. We don't question what our thinking is based on and whether trying to change the behaviour of someone is going to solve the problem. It can be even harder to stop and think in a multi-agency setting. It's hard to consider using ecological approaches when we are working with agencies who are experts in using behaviour-based approaches in community settings.

BEHAVIOUR-BASED

A behaviour-based response is one that tries to change the behaviour of an individual person. There are two main methods of doing this:

- Rewards and punishments. This is based on the idea that we can change how someone behaves if we reward the things we want them to do and punish the things we don't want them to do. For example, a zero-tolerance approach to harmful sexual behaviour is based on the idea that young people are less likely to harm others sexually if they know they will be punished for it by an institution, like a school.
- Thinking and beliefs. This is about trying to change someone's behaviour by changing the way they think and their beliefs. It is based on the idea that our beliefs and thoughts drive our behaviour. Examples of this are 'consequential thinking' and 'victim awareness' work with young people involved with youth justice services, which seek to deter a young person from committing crimes by getting them to think about the impact of their actions on other people and themselves.

Behaviour-based responses in education, social care, health and youth justice use rewards and punishment or thinking and beliefs methods.

When we used this lens to think about Contextual Safeguarding, we found that behaviour-based responses dominated. We did not see practitioners discussing together whether the harm was mostly due to the environment or the choices of individuals. We did not see multi-agency partnerships asking each other if a response would change the social conditions or the behaviour of young people. Although partnerships were targeting places outside the home, most were not doing that in a way that was in keeping with Contextual Safeguarding. This is because they were focussed on changing the behaviour of young people rather than the environment.

ECOLOGICAL

Ecological responses are those that try to change the environment, context or structure around a person, to reduce or remove a social problem. Responses like this can be at the policy level or a practice level:

- Policy level. This is about creating policy that addresses inequality or discrimination in society. For example, a response to youth pregnancy could be offering free, easily accessible and non-judgemental sexual health services for teenagers as a way of creating an environment where young people have choices around sex and fertility;
- Practice level. This is about understanding and finding out the local and contextual issues that are undermining safety for young people and trying to change this. For example, if a young person is found to carry weapons in the school, rather than excluding them, an ecological response could be to find out how to make the school and the community safer so that this young person (and others too) no longer feel the need to defend themselves.

Examples of behaviour-based responses

- Policy documents that focussed on reducing young people's 'anti-social behaviour'
- Young people who were weapon carrying being given education programmes designed to encourage them to make better choices
- Programmes about what a healthy relationship is, as a way of encouraging young women to not chose abusive relationships
- Work to give young people insight into what criminal exploitation is and its risks, as a way of making sure they can spot it, as a response to a young person who had been shot
- Moving young people away from an area to stop them being sexually exploited

Examples of ecological approaches

- Youth outreach workers spending time on a street, to become part of the street and change the 'rules at play' so young people were safer
- Working with the different agencies to change the attitudes of professionals so that they saw young people as needing care and protection rather than punishment or re-location which led to changes in resources and policy
- Addressing racist attitudes of professionals that had created barriers to young people accessing their education, which in turn meant they were at heightened risk of exclusion
- Holding a community meeting to build a more positive relationship and attitude towards young people amongst residents and businesses

What can you do?

Here are some questions that you can discuss in your multi-agency partnership that will help you to have a better awareness of whether your responses target the behaviour or the environment:

- Who are the partners in your meeting? Consider the training, background and ways of understanding problems and solutions they each bring. Think about who has the best experience or expertise in working ecologically
- Look at the responses and interventions that you use – go through each one and consider whether they are behaviour-based or ecological in their focus
- Where is the space for critical reflection in your meetings? Can you pause and consider what your interventions say about how you understand the cause of the issues you responding to? Can you create an atmosphere where it is ok not to know, and think about what needs to happen and why?
- What do you need as a partnership to work more ecologically together?

Conclusion

Contextual Safeguarding asks partnerships to work ecologically in response to the safety and welfare needs of young people. This is new work. It will probably mean doing things differently and a process of unlearning. It will take time. Working with harm is unsettling and difficult enough, but doing this with partner agencies adds another level of complexity. We are likely to feel pressure to be seen to do be doing something in front of our partners. If we're not aware of these feelings, if we don't talk about them together, we are more likely to just carry on as we always have done as a way to feel like we are doing something.

This briefing is supported by a workshop activity that can be carried out by multi-agency partnerships.

The questions in this briefing and the accompanying training resources are to help you create multi-agency co-working situations that are safe enough for you stop doing the things you have always done, to try new things and learn together. We hope they support you to develop new shared goals and a clearer vision for how your partnerships can change the contexts of harm with, and for, young people.

To learn more check out our research article, workshop activity and infographic by searching 'hymn sheet' on the CS website.