

The Social Model and Contextual Safeguarding

Key Messages for Practice

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Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding young people from harm they experience in extra-familial contexts. As such it is compatible with, and supports the development of, a range of practice frameworks and models that are being used to improve child protection responses and systems.

In this briefing we explore the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding and the Social Model of Child Protection – and the potential that may exist in bringing these two ideas together to create child protection practices that target the social conditions in which abuse occurs.

The briefing is divided into three sections. In section one we summarise the two approaches. In the second section we reflect on what the two approaches share and where they may diverge. In the final section we present how they could work together by use of a case study, and make recommendations for how to explore this potential in the future.

Section 1: A summary of the two approaches

Social Model of Child Protection

The Social Model of child protection focuses on: *what are the economic, social and cultural barriers to ensuring children are cared for safely and their relational needs and identities respected?* It marks a shift away from solely focusing on intra-familial risks in individual households.

It is based upon evidence that highlights:

- The inequalities in children's chances of being able to grow up safely in their families and communities, thus posing ethical and other concerns under the UNCRC
- Poverty and associated features, such as inadequate and insecure work, housing and health difficulties, are key contributors to family difficulties
- The shame associated with poverty affects psychological health and contributes to parents' lack of self-efficacy and confidence in parenting
- The inter-connection of psychological harms with social conditions
- The importance of social connections to individual and family well-being

Children and families require robust social protections, with decent income support strategies, housing, education and health for all, but also responsive and supportive locally-based community services. The social model involves moving beyond reliance on top-down professional-led approaches to protecting children to one that promotes community and locality-based services, co-production and peer support. It is founded on seeing young people and families as sources of expertise about system design and best practice.

The Social Model requires local authorities to know their communities and engage in dialogue with adults and children about their needs, strengths, vulnerabilities and the resources necessary for all to flourish. Assessments and interventions need to actively engage with the economic, social and environmental contexts in which the child and family is living. Some key elements of practice include: valuing children and families' hopes and aspirations and what they say they need to thrive; actively promoting human rights and providing advocacy; fostering positive social connections; recognising the importance of practical help; and crucially taking a situated and

dialogic approach to ethics that places dilemmas and decisions in a broader social, political and cultural context.

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. The approach has been in development since 2011 following a three-year review of practice responses to cases of peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2017). The Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin et al. 2016), which provides a conceptual, strategic and operational framework for designing the approach in local areas, is made up of four 'domains'. A Contextual Safeguarding System:

- **Targets** the contexts (and social conditions) associated with abuse (Domain 1).
- **Uses a child protection** rather than community safety **legislative framework** to develop responses to extra-familial harm.(Domain 2)
- **Features partnerships** between children's services and young people, parents, wider communities along with the range of agencies who have a reach into the places and spaces where extra-familial harm occurs (Domain 3)
- **Measures contextual impact** of its work – and the change it creates in public, education and peer settings, as well as for individual children and families (Domain 4)

Collectively, these four domains describe the capabilities of a safeguarding system designed to respond to the contextual dynamics of extra-familial harm.

There are a set of values that underpin the Contextual Framework – and understanding these is integral to ensuring its use stays true to the intention behind its design. The need to assert these values emerged through testing and were published in 2020 (Firmin, 2020; Firmin and Lloyd, 2020; Wroe, 2020). Contextual Safeguarding is:

- **Collaborative:** Is achieved through collaboration between professionals, children and young people, families and communities to inform decisions about safety.
- **Ecological:** Considers the links between the spaces where young people experience harm and how these are shaped by inequalities
- **Rights-based:** Rooted in children's and human rights.
- **Strengths-based:** Builds on the strengths of individuals and communities to achieve change.
- **Evidence-informed:** grounded in the reality of how life happens. Proposes solutions that are informed by the lived experiences of young people, families, communities and practitioners.

When applying this framework and set of values, practitioners have engaged in activities which: recognise the *interplay* between contexts; assess the *weight of influence* different contexts have on young people's safety, and; seek to build contextual safety on two levels (Firmin, 2020). On one level practitioners and teams have identified ways to consider extra-familial contexts in their direct work with children and families – such as foreground the impact of these contexts during assessments, or recommending interventions in these contexts as part of the plan to safeguard and promote the welfare of a young person. At a second level systems have been created for referring, assessing and providing support into groups and contexts themselves as a means of building safety.

Section 2: The relationship between the two approaches

What they share in common

These two approaches share three core ambitions. Firstly, they identify, and seek to address, the individualised lens of child protection systems, where risk is located within individuals and individual families – i.e. focused on the actions of omission or commission by parents and young people - at the expense of attention to social harms. They also highlight the ethical and practical challenges that come with the assessment of risk and parenting capacity as the ‘core business’ of social work, by promoting approaches that intervene with and change the contexts in which families exist, rather than interventions that solely focus on effecting change in individual behaviour, or indeed in individual families. Finally, they promote a move beyond a reliance on state-services and top-down approaches to child protection, in favour of co-produced community and locality-based services and partnerships.

What we are yet to understand

There are four key areas where Contextual Safeguarding and The Social Model differ – either in their development or in their intention.

The Social Model and Contextual Safeguarding are at different stages of development. Contextual Safeguarding is being piloted in multiple test sites following a blueprint designed in Hackney. A blueprint for a Social Model, that identifies how to operationalise the conceptual framework across a system, is still under development. An applied interpretation of the Social Model will allow for further direct, and practice, comparisons of the two approaches.

The Social Model is intended to be relevant to child protection and safeguarding work across the age range of children, and situations of intra and extra familial harm. Contextual Safeguarding is designed specifically to advance how children’s services engage with harm in extra-familial contexts – and the impact of this harm on adolescents. It’s relevance to harm within familial relationships is yet to be tested.

Contextual Safeguarding has principally focused on addressing harm in immediate contexts – such as school and community environments. It is yet to be tested as a means of addressing structural inequalities such as racism and poverty. The Social Model has been applied more readily to structural inequalities, in particular poverty, as well as focusing on building community networks and sources of support.

Finally, Contextual Safeguarding emerged, in part, to increase social care support for young people affected by extra-familial harm: often in cases where families/young people wanted such support but were instead closed to children’s services or intervened with via community safety and youth justice interventions. The Social Model is informed in part by a concern to reduce formal statutory interventions that separate children from families, who are struggling due to social harms and structural inequalities.

These differences may prove to be strengths when the two approaches are combined. For example, there is a risk that Contextual Safeguarding approaches are used to target interventions at school and community settings without addressing the structural inequalities that undermine safety in those settings. Utilising the Social Model could be one way to mitigate such unintended consequences. Likewise, the Social Model could be considered helpful conceptually but pose difficulties for social care leaders in terms of application. Identifying how the Social Model intersects with, and adds value, to practical interpretations of Contextual Safeguarding could address this challenge.

Section 3: Practical implications

How the two approaches could work together

There are many opportunities to draw these two approaches together to realise the aims that they share.

Building a framework for assessment, or practice more widely, that speaks to both approaches could be a good place to start. The Contextual Safeguarding framework has been converted into a range of practice resources and a service implementation toolkit. Identifying elements of that toolkit in which the Social Model could also be applied would be one way to test this. For example, resources have been developed for contextualising child protection conferences – with recommendations made for activities to take place prior to, during, and following a conference. Reviewing, and potentially adapting, that tool through the lens of the Social Model, would create an opportunity to explore what a combined framework may ask of, and offer to, practice.

Building a combined framework would also facilitate opportunities to pilot practices that take into account socio-economic conditions or structural discrimination, in areas where Contextual Safeguarding is being implemented, building test sites that explicitly embed both approaches.

Finally, opportunities to pilot community-based initiatives that engage parents and young people in service design, delivery and evaluation present possibilities for realising the values of both approaches in practice. Should such initiatives create approaches that target structural, as well as immediately contextual, conditions that undermine safety, they could expand the current application of Contextual Safeguarding to reach broader contextual concerns with which it is yet to engage.

Case study example

The Scenario

Aaron is 14 years old. He has two brothers, Kevin (9) & Karl (7). Their parents are Monica and Paul. The family are Black British of Caribbean origin. They live in North London. Monica works part-time cooking in a local café and Paul is a lorry driver. Paul came to the UK from Jamaica as a child, but his immigration status is currently unresolved. The boys lived with both parents until they separated 3 years ago. After the separation the children stayed with their mother. Although separated, the parents have an amicable relationship and Paul visits the home 2-3 times per week to see the boys. He rents a room in a house close-by.

The family have had involvement with Children's Services on and off over the past 5 years, due to conflict between the parents and concerns about Monica's use of alcohol. More recently the children were made subject to child protection plans following an incident of violence between Monica and Aaron. At the child protection conference professionals expressed concerns that Aaron was increasingly involved with a local gang, and was beyond his mother's control, staying out late, sometimes overnight. He had also come to the attention of the police for possession of an imitation gun and cannabis, and had been injured in a fight with another boy. His school attendance is very poor. The child protection plan included a parenting skills course for Monica and allocation of a Gangs worker for Aaron. Paul was willing to take over Aaron's care but did not have suitable housing and has no recourse to public funds.

Following an escalation of the concerns, the local authority initiated care proceedings and Aaron was placed in foster care outside London.

Points of challenge in traditional child protection systems

A Social Model of Child Protection and Contextual Safeguarding lens would trouble two key elements of this case.

1. Using a s.47 enquiry and child protection plan, which focuses on boundary setting and parenting, as a means of safeguarding Aaron
2. The use of a relocation to safeguard Aaron from harm beyond the family setting without interventions to build safety in his family, community and peer relationships

Points of opportunity

Contextual Safeguarding

From a Contextual Safeguarding perspective, the plan to safeguard Aaron needs to focus on addressing the sources of harm, and building safety for him. It isn't clear that a child protection plan focused on parenting and a relocation will achieve this. Instead we would hope to see '**Context Weighting**' activities to ascertain from his perspective, and from his families, where harm is coming from – and this forming the basis of a plan to build safety in the locations and groups where Aaron feels unsafe. Such activities may require a temporary relocation, in order to protect Aaron's physical safety, but any such intervention would be accompanied with **contextual interventions** that seek to build safety in Aaron's home community – allowing him to reunite with his family and friends in due course.

Social Model of Child Protection

From a Social Model perspective, the agencies responding to Aaron's needs would be part of a fabric of local support that is embedded in a 'whole place' approach. This means the local authority, third sector organisations and communities would be actively working together to understand and tackle what is happening locally, what economic, social and cultural issues are being posed for whom and how.

The plan for Aaron and his family would be developed with them and include a focus on addressing the wider harms that are impacting on their lives and relationships with each other and wider community. Working with the whole family to address the collective needs they share (including socio-economic and psycho-social) would improve the experiences of not just Aaron but also his siblings and parents. Supporting Paul to secure his immigration status and obtaining affordable housing so that a placement for Aaron with his father is a possible option would be a key focus, alongside joint work with community and other welfare services to tackle the experiences of young black men in the local context. Family conflict would require an individual focus, albeit one that is situated within the wider socio-economic histories and contexts of family members lives. The wider issues of social and economic precarity would require a collective community / statutory agency action plan.

The two combined

The two approaches enable practitioners to move beyond plans that individualise harm (located with parents and parenting capacity or with adolescent decision-making). Instead they promote an approach that addresses the needs of families through meaningful attempts at bolstering safety (through the provision of material/social services *and* resources, for example). This applies to the factors undermining Aaron's safety in extra-familial contexts, as well as social and structural factors that are impacting Aaron's family and frustrating their attempts to care for him

Conclusion and Next Steps

A Contextual Safeguarding and Social Model approach could offer important and tangible solutions to what James Munby has described as a 'crisis' in children's social care; where increasing numbers of children, and more recently older young people, are entering the care system. Both approaches require child protection systems to look beyond individual families and to consider the contextual and social nature of harm. They require the mobilisation of organisational, community and family resource to generate meaningful systems of safety, beyond tackling risk through high-end (and often high-cost) interventions. These interventions, as in Aaron's case, but also in cases of intra-familial harm involving younger children, often result in family separation, further embedding relational, economic and social harms.

A partnership between the two approaches offers a bespoke opportunity to embed a Social Model within Contextual Safeguarding's on-going project of child protection system reform, and to push Contextual Safeguarding beyond intervention in parks, schools and groups to understanding the complex systems of inequalities that shape the spaces it has traditionally been concerned with. The 2020 social climate that has shone a light on institutionalised racism and increasing levels of child poverty across the UK make this ever more important. Utilising a combination of the Social Model and Contextual Safeguarding frameworks could ensure that a practical, meaningful and sustainable response is feasible at time of significant pressure on local authority budgets.

The teams behind Contextual Safeguarding and Social Model are interested in piloting a combined system reform approach in a local authority area in the UK, utilising and advancing the current test-site methodologies developed under the Contextual Safeguarding programme of work.

We invite you to join this conversation. Please get in touch at carlene.firmin@beds.ac.uk if you:

- Have a practice example that you would like to share where a Contextual Safeguarding and Social Model approach has been engaged to support a family or child.
- Would be interested in discussing a pilot in your local authority/area.