

# Contextual Safeguarding

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An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework

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## Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts, and young people's experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships. Therefore children's social care practitioners need to engage with individuals and sectors who do have influence over/within extra-familial contexts, and recognise that assessment of, and intervention with, these spaces are a critical part of safeguarding practices. Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, expands the objectives of child protection systems in recognition that young people are vulnerable to abuse in a range of social contexts.

Contextual Safeguarding has been developed at the University of Bedfordshire over the past six years to inform policy and practice approaches to safeguarding adolescents. Initially emerging from a three-year review of operational responses to peer-on-peer abuse<sup>i</sup>, Contextual Safeguarding provides a framework to advance child protection and safeguarding responses to a range of extra-familial risks that compromise the safety and welfare of young people<sup>ii</sup>. This briefing collates and summarises learning from multiple publications on the subject of Contextual Safeguarding<sup>iii</sup> with particular reference to the:

1. International evidence on why context is important to adolescent welfare
2. Contextual Safeguarding framework with specific reference to how contexts relate to each other and inform young people's behaviours
3. Contextual Safeguarding system and the role of contextual interventions
4. Implications of Contextual Safeguarding for child protection systems and practices

## Why is context important

As individuals move from early childhood and into adolescence they spend increasing amounts of time socialising independently of their families<sup>iv</sup>. During this time the nature of young people's schools and neighbourhoods, and the relationships that they form in these settings, inform the extent to which they encounter protection or abuse. Evidence shows that, for example: from robbery on public transport, sexual violence in parks and gang-related violence on streets, through to online bullying and harassment from school-based peers and abuse within their intimate relationships, young people encounter significant harm in a range of settings beyond their families.

Peer relationships are increasingly influential during adolescence<sup>v</sup>, setting social norms which inform young people's experiences, behaviours and choices and determine peer status. These relationships are, in turn, shaped by, and shape, the school, neighbourhood and online contexts in which they develop (Figure 1). So if young people socialise in safe and protective schools and community settings they will be supported to form safe and protective peer relationships. However, if they form friendships in contexts characterised by violence and/or harmful attitudes these relationships too may be anti-social, unsafe or promote problematic social norms as a means of navigating, or surviving in, those spaces.

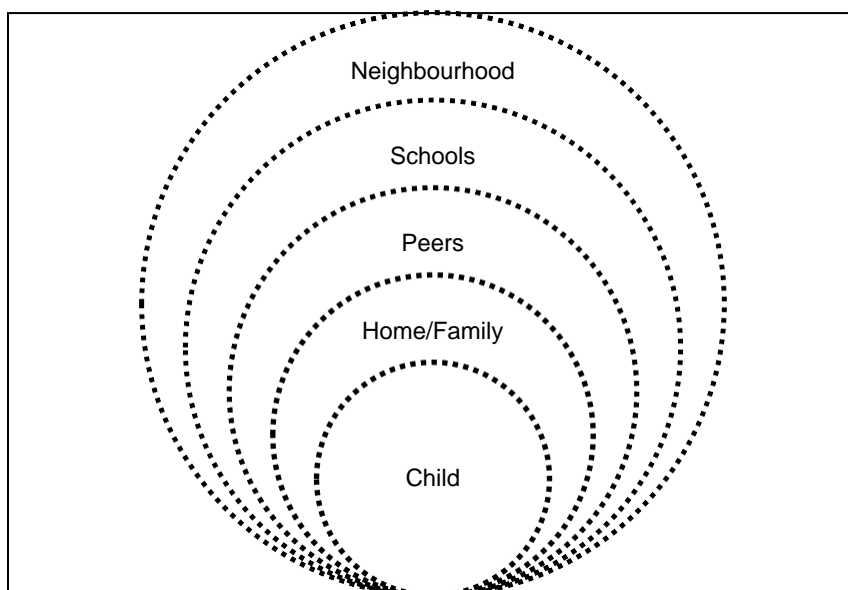


Figure 1: Contexts of Adolescent Safety and Vulnerability( Firmin 2013:47)

Young people's engagement in extra-familial contexts can also inform, and be informed by, what is happening in their homes. Therefore, when young people are exposed to violence or exploitation in their school, community or peer group this may fracture their family relationships and undermine the capacity of their parents/carers to keep them safe. Likewise, if young people are exposed to harm within their families such as domestic or physical

abuse this can impact their behaviour in extra-familial settings. They may learn/adopt harmful social norms which inform their peer relationships. Or young people in these situations may avoid their home altogether and spend time in street or community settings where they may experience criminality, violence and exploitation<sup>vi</sup>. Given this contextual nature of safety and vulnerability during adolescence, systems and services designed to keep young people safe need to engage with the dynamics at play in extra-familial, as well as familial, settings (Figure 1).

## Contextual Safeguarding Framework

In light of the above evidence base, from 2011-2014 I explored the contextual dynamics of nine cases of peer-on-peer abuse and the ability of services to safeguard the 145 young people featured in them<sup>vii</sup>. Through this process it became increasingly evident that while the risks faced by young people in these cases percolated and escalated in their peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods, professionals assessed and intervened with their families in a bid to keep young people safe<sup>viii</sup>. These attempts to address the contextual dynamics of peer-abuse using interventions with young people and families were compromised by:

- a) The **interplay** between different contexts and relationships (for example the impact that young people's experiences in their neighbourhood had on their relationships in school and vice versa)
- b) The varied '**weight of influence**' that different contexts appeared to have – for example peer influence appeared to outweigh that of parents/carers in the escalation towards an abusive incident, and; risks within extra-familial settings appeared to outweigh the relative safety within families when motivating young people's actions

These dynamics are exemplified by the following case excerpts:

*Mother of 'Jamie' also phoned the school to state that Jamie left home on the Sunday afternoon after she approached him and his friends about smoking in the stairwell. Jamie had phoned his mother each day but said he was staying with friends (while aged 15). There was a failure to ascertain what happened during that period, although some attempts (were) made by school to speak to other students to find out where Jamie was staying. (Case 6, suspect in a rape case) (Firmin, 2015:194)*

*'I know most of the boys arrested in connection with this offence and if it became public knowledge that I have assisted police and provided evidence against them I would be subjected to serious violence before or after the trial...I am aware that some, especially 'Lucas', uses violence against people on a regular basis....I would fear for my safety, my family's safety and our property'.* (Case 1, view of bystander who intervened during a rape) (Firmin, 2015: 208)

*'Cos I know what these boys are like if they don't get what they want they'll beat you up or get girls to beat you up and they'll switch for no apparent reason...if you say no they consider it as being rude and they don't like getting talked to like that, and if you're rude to them then they'll beat you up and I've seen how they beat up people, how everyone's scared of them....I said no for something very little I've been beaten up and bottled and I realised if I did say no what would happen...I was pressurised and scared, I knew deep down I didn't want it cos I was still young but I didn't have a choice.'* (Case 4, account of young woman raped by peers but who was living in a safe home) (Firmin, 2015:122)

In order to engage with these dynamics professionals in the cases required a policy and practice framework that moved beyond work with individuals and families to recognise a) the differential weight of influence that contexts have in shaping the behaviours of young people, and b) the impact that extra-familial settings can have on the ability of parents and carers to be protective. A Contextual Safeguarding framework was built in response (Figure 2):

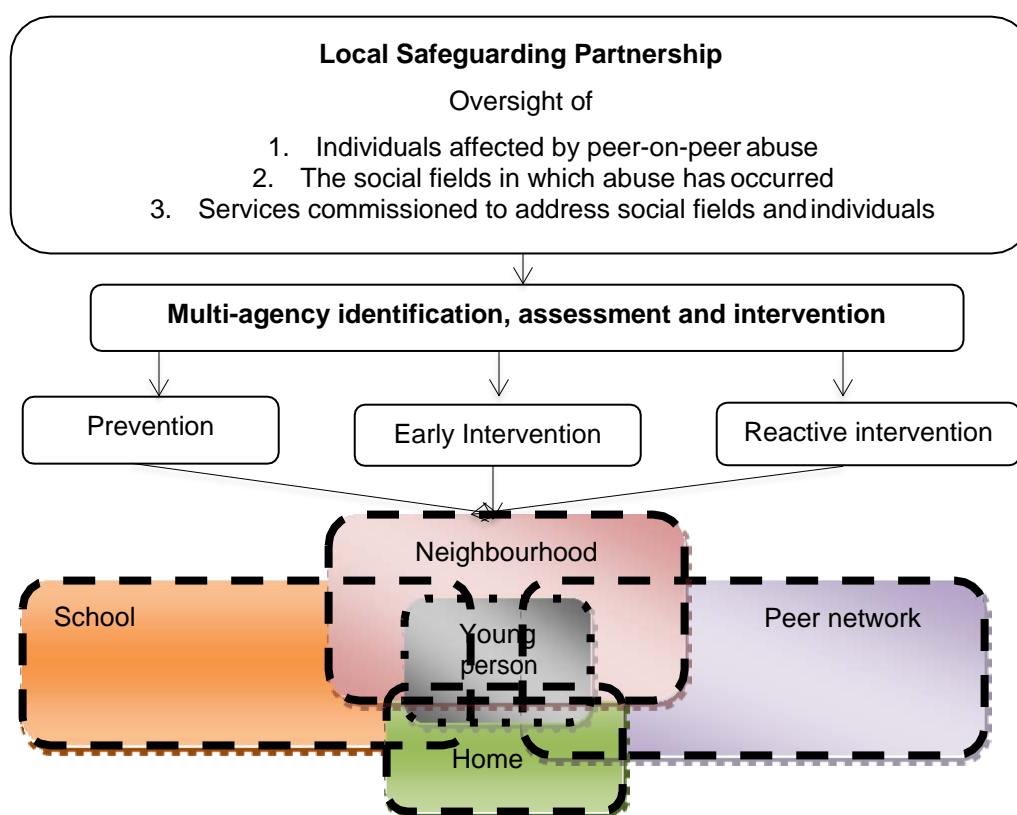


Figure 2 Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin 2015:298)

This framework provided a strategic and operational illustration of a Contextual Safeguarding model. It depicts a young person who is part of multiple social contexts – overlapping with each other as a result of **interplay**. The varying size of each context box depicts the matter of **context-weighting**. The size of each context box can be amended to represent the weight of influence that a particular context has in any given case (for example, the norms within a young person's neighbourhood may bear most influence in one case and therefore

be the largest box in the illustration– in another case it may be norms at school etc.). At a strategic level this framework proposes that any local safeguarding partnership should have oversight of the nature and number of the contexts in which abuse has occurred within their geographical area of responsibility as well as the individuals affected. Such information could inform the commissioning of contextual preventative, early and reactive interventions as part of a wider safeguarding system.

A case example helps to illustrate the implications of this model. Dean is groomed by a street gang in his neighbourhood to traffic drugs across the country. He is approached by them when hanging-out with his friends at a local take-away food shop. The influence of those who have groomed him means that Dean doesn't come home when his parents ask him too and stops answering their calls while running drugs. Slowly Dean's parents lose control of him and when they try to lock him in the house he physically attacks his mother to get out. Dean is one of six peers who have all been approached at the take-away shop for the purposes of drug trafficking. Within a Contextual Safeguarding model the risk in Dean's neighbourhood, and the group who have groomed him, appear to be more influential than his parents. Addressing this issue may in turn address the challenges that Dean is facing at home – whereas intervening with Dean's family is unlikely to impact the risks he is facing in the community. Strategically the safeguarding partnership is made aware of the trend associated to the take-away shop, a street gang, six young men and the issue of drugs trafficking and work together to design a plan for disrupting risk in that context (and thereby safeguard all six young men affected by it).

At this stage Contextual Safeguarding offered a framework to shape the development of policy and practice models for safeguarding young people affected by extra-familial risks. The framework needed to be applied in order to identify the resources, structures and partnerships required to bring the model to life and test its usability.

## A Contextual Safeguarding system and interventions

From 2013-2017, the emerging Contextual Safeguarding framework was applied to develop local responses to peer-on-peer abuse with 14 multi-agency safeguarding partnerships across England<sup>1</sup> – referred to as sites in this briefing<sup>x</sup>. Each site engaged in a contextual audit<sup>x</sup> to identify the extent to which its policies and practices addressed the extra-familial dynamics of peer-on-peer abuse. Following audits an action plan was developed in each site to enhance or embed existing contextual practice. Collectively this process resulted in 18 activities, co-produced by researchers and practitioners, to contextualise local safeguarding practices. Activities included: work with Fair Access Panels to explore the use of managed moves in response to vulnerability at school; the development of templates to collect information on peer-group dynamics as part of assessment processes, and; frameworks to contextualise multi-agency meetings about young people who had displayed harmful sexual behaviours. All resources produced during this project have been published<sup>xi</sup>, as has a toolkit of the audit process<sup>xii</sup>.

The contextual interventions designed during this project were intended to complement and enhance, rather than replace, models of 1:1 and family intervention. Extensive evidence has established the importance of relational working for young people, as well as the work that is required with families, for addressing the impact of extra-familial risk on children and families<sup>xiii</sup>. Contextual Safeguarding provides a framework through which to recognise extra-

<sup>1</sup> Sites engaged in three stages: the first involved three sites (made up of nine local authorities) 2013 - 2016, the second involved a further three sites (made up of three local authorities) 2014-2016, and the third involved a further three sites (made up of three local authorities) 201- 2017

familial factors that may undermine or disrupt family and 1:1 interventions. As illustrated in Figure 4, extra-familial risks can: impact the emotional, physical and mental well-being of young people; drive their involvement in offending, using drugs and alcohol and going-missing; undermine their access to education and other services, and; negatively impact family relationships. 1:1 and familial work is critical for supporting young people to: recognise, and recover from, these experiences; re-build their positive relationships; and re-engage in positive activities. However, in order for this to happen, the extra-familial factors that have contributed to this impact also need to be addressed. Therefore, young people need to be supported to build protective peer relationships, within safe school and community settings. Without this type of intervention, the extra-familial risks which negatively impacted an individual and their family will persist, and undermine the potential impact of the support that they are receiving.

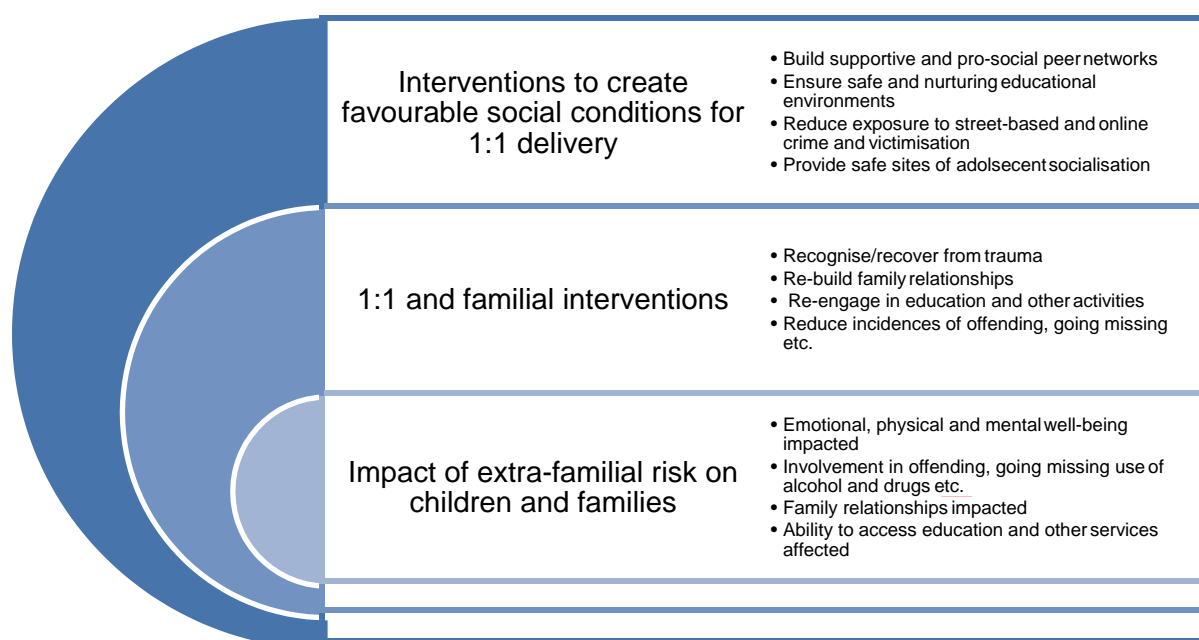


Figure 3: Role of Contextual Interventions (Firmin et al., 2016:47)

While initially designed to respond to the extra-familial dynamics of peer-on-peer abuse, practitioners identified that the contextual interventions and resources developed during the project were relevant for addressing the extra-familial dynamics of abuse in adolescence more broadly. Work across the 14 sites also demonstrated the need to contextualise the broader safeguarding and child protection systems in which such interventions and resources were embedded. The interventions/resources developed during site-work were largely applied within child protection systems that, more broadly, remained focused on safeguarding young people from risks within their families. This limited the reach of contextual interventions in participating sites and the extent to which they could be viewed as safeguarding, as opposed to crime-reduction, practices. In order to maximise their impact contextual interventions needed to be embedded within a Contextual Safeguarding system.

When reflecting on the type of system that would be required to maximise the impact of the contextual interventions designed during site work I identified **four domains** of a Contextual Safeguarding system. A safeguarding and child protection system would be contextual if it:

1. Was designed to identify, assess and intervene with the *social conditions* of abuse (i.e. targeted the nature of the contexts in which abuse occurred rather than just the individuals affected by it);

2. Drew extra-familial contexts into child protection and safeguarding processes (which were traditionally focused on families)
3. Built partnerships with sectors and individuals who managed extra-familial settings where young people spent their time (such as those responsible for the management of schools, transport services, shopping centres, libraries, take-away shops), and;
4. Measured its impact in relation to a change in the nature of the contexts where young people were vulnerable to abuse or harm (rather than just focusing on a change in the behaviour of individuals who continued to spend time in harmful spaces).



Figure 4 Four Domains of Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin et al., 2016:46-49)

These four domains provide the foundations for a systemic change in the way that services describe, and respond to, abuse in adolescence.

## Contextual Safeguarding and child protection systems

The child protection system, and the legislative and policy framework which underpins it, was designed to protect children and young people from risks posed by their families and/or situations where families had reduced capacity to safeguard those in their care. As noted throughout in this briefing, extra-familial risks can reduce/undermine the capacity of families/carers to safeguard young people – and to this extent extra-familial risks are accommodated by existing approaches. However, in traditional systems this dynamic would be addressed by intervening with families to increase their capacity to safeguard young people from harm and/or relocating young people away from harmful contexts.

A Contextual Safeguarding system supports the development of approaches which disrupt/change harmful extra-familial contexts rather than move families/young people away from them. While parents/carers are not in a position to change the nature of extra-familial contexts those who manage or deliver services in these spaces are; and they therefore become critical partners in the safeguarding agenda. This approach would extend the concept of **'capacity to safeguard'** beyond families to those individuals and sectors who manage extra-familial settings in which young people encounter risk. Whose capacity to



safeguard is undermined when a child is exploited at school, on a bus or in their local shopping centre – who can contribute to creating safety in these contexts? Such an extension of the term ‘capacity to safeguard’ is likely to have implications for child protection and safeguarding processes and structures, raising a number of questions:

- To what extent can existing systems receive referrals about peer groups or extra-familial contexts in which young people encounter significant harm?
- How can the nature of extra-familial contexts and peer relationships (and their impact on parental capacity to safeguard) be built into child and family assessments?
- What are the screening and reviewing structures for processing such referrals through a child protection system?
- What are the terms of reference, and partnership roles, for strategy and planning meetings to discuss concerns related to contexts as opposed to families?
- What are the oversight arrangements for an intervention plan related to an extra-familial context that may be attached to multiple children and families?

Returning to the case example of Dean introduced earlier in this briefing. In the current system it would be Dean and his family who would be referred, assessed and receive intervention to address his behaviour. In a Contextual Safeguarding system extra-familial settings and relationships could be subject to this process; so the take-away shop, street gang and/or Dean’s peer group may be referred into a safeguarding system, assessed, discussed by a partnership and then to subject to an intervention as a means of keeping Dean safe.

In addition to the site work that we have undertaken, a number of organisations in the UK and internationally have developed interventions that could be used to disrupt risk in shopping centres, take away shops, peer groups, schools, parks and other public settings. A Contextual Safeguarding practitioners’ network is collecting, and sharing, examples of such interventions ([www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk](http://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)). A child protection, social care or safeguarding system with the capacity to generate (and assess) contextual referrals into such interventions (and answer the questions outlined above) is in development. The London Borough of Hackney received social care innovation funding to embed Contextual Safeguarding within its social care and safeguarding systems over a two year period from 2017. A number of other local authorities are working alongside them to scale the learning from this process into their safeguarding systems and continue to advance this approach.

## Conclusion

This briefing has outlined the process through which Contextual Safeguarding has been built as a framework for advancing practical, strategic and conceptual models for safeguarding adolescents. In summary, Contextual Safeguarding provides a framework against which to design safeguarding systems that address extra-familial risk. In doing so it:

- Recognises the weight of peer influence on the decisions that young people make
- Extends the notion of ‘capacity to safeguard’ to sectors that operate beyond families
- Provides a framework in which referrals can be made for contextual interventions that, when delivered effectively, can complement work with individuals and families

Going forward, the Contextual Safeguarding team at the University of Bedfordshire will use the learning from Hackney to identify the principles of practice for a Contextual Safeguarding system and co-create resources with practitioners which aid the delivery of such an approach. These will be used to scale-up Contextual Safeguarding systems into other parts of the country and, along with the learning being generated in the Contextual Safeguarding Practitioners’ Network, will enhance responses to safeguarding adolescents nationally and internationally.

To join the Contextual Safeguarding Network please visit:  
[www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk](http://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Firmin, 2017a; Firmin, 2015
- <sup>ii</sup> Firmin, et al., 2016b
- <sup>iii</sup> Firmin, et al., 2016a; Firmin, et al., 2016b; Firmin, 2017a; Firmin, 2017b; Lloyd et al., 2017; Firmin & Hancock, Forthcoming, 2018
- <sup>iv</sup> Coleman, 2011; Hanson & Holmes, 2015; Sidebotham, et al., 2016
- <sup>v</sup> Barter, et al., 2009; Firmin, 2017b; Warr, 2002
- <sup>vi</sup> Barter, et al., 2009; Catch 22, 2013; Centre for Social Justice , 2016; Cowie , et al., 2008 ; Firmin, 2017a; Letourneau & Borduin, 2008; Ringrose, et al., 2011; Smallbone, et al., 2013; Transport Select Committee, 2014; Women and Equalities Committee, 2016
- <sup>vii</sup> Firmin, 2015; Firmin, 2017a
- <sup>viii</sup> Firmin, 2017a; Firmin, 2017b
- <sup>ix</sup> Firmin, et al., 2016b
- <sup>x</sup> Lloyd, et al., 2017
- <sup>xi</sup> Firmin, et al., 2016b
- <sup>xii</sup> Lloyd, et al., 2017
- <sup>xiii</sup> Catch 22, 2013; Hackett, 2014; Hanson & Holmes, 2015

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