

Developing a peer-led group work project with young women at a youth club

This case study was written by Laura Price, Young Women's Associate at Abianda, to share learning from a peer-led group work project developed with young women at a youth club. Laura reflects further on this piece of work in a podcast available [here](#).

At Abianda, we have been exploring how to embed Contextual Safeguarding approaches into our work with young women affected by gangs and exploitation over the last few years. Much of this change so far has happened at Level 1 of Contextual Safeguarding work, through wrapping recognition of extra-familial context around our direct, 1:1 work with young women. For instance, we do safety mapping with the young women we work with to better understand where they feel safe or unsafe in the community and to come up with safety plans together.

We are keen to explore how we might extend our work with young women into Level 2 of a Contextual Safeguarding approach. At Level 2 of Contextual Safeguarding work, professionals actively work to change the extra-familial contexts identified as impacting young people. Contextual Safeguarding recognises the influence peers have on one another, the peer dynamics that can increase risk and the way peers can offer support and act as protective factors. These dynamics and influences can also change based on the environment the peer groups are in. In light of this, we have begun to think about what Level 2 of Contextual Safeguarding work might look like for us through peer-led group work.

This case study shares learning from a peer-led group work project developed with young women at a youth club. The youth club was identified by the young women as a safe space within a park and wider area that did not always feel safe for young people due to criminal behaviour, the threat of rival gang associated young people entering the area and the risk of young people being groomed and exploited.

How the project came about

This project began 18 months before the group project started when we were exploring offering group work and 1:1 support to the young women at the youth club. By attending the open access youth club sessions we built relationships with the youth workers and the young people. We asked the young women for their views on the different types of support on offer and they unanimously agreed that group work would not work in that setting because it was a space to just hang and chill out after school. Despite this, three young women from the same peer group said they would like to engage with the 1:1 sessions.

Through the 1:1 work a number of issues of contextual harm were identified that were specific to this peer group and the area they frequented, including young people from rival gangs entering the area and threatening violence, the risk of exploitation and a common theme of domestic abuse in many of the relationships these young women had experienced themselves, as well as those of their friends. These safeguarding concerns were fed back to the local authority, professionals working with other young people from the group/area and other relevant agencies in partnership with the young women while risk assessing their own safety, as a result of the information being shared.

A new opportunity for peer support

All three young women engaging in 1:1 support had expressed a desire early on in the work to be involved in the participation and peer to peer work that Abianda does. Due to their college and school commitments by the end of the support this was not possible but we began to look for other opportunities for them to develop this skillset. During the course of our 1:1 support with them, we also made an effort to visit the youth club and keep in touch with the youth workers who were keen to re-explore group work in the future. Through maintaining this relationship and building a better understanding of the youth club context and surrounding area, we adjusted our group work offer to be more flexible by removing the fixed number of sessions, changing the topics covered and creating room for youth facilitators to influence and plan the programme. At the same time, the youth workers identified some of the young women from the peer group I was working with to independently taking on a more mature, peer support role with other young people during the open access sessions.

By this point the dynamics and some of the members of the peer group had changed. Through consultation with one young woman who had engaged with 1:1 support, and discussions with other young women at the youth club, it was agreed that a peer-led group project may work and would be useful for other young women at the club. Three older young women (16-17) agreed to take on the role of peer facilitators in order to gain new skills that they could add to their CV. They also felt that they would be best placed to engage the younger young women (13-15) who they felt would benefit from having a space to talk about emotions, relationships and safety in the local area. The young facilitators identified the young women they felt would benefit from the group, used time in the open access sessions to engage with them and encourage them to attend and gathered information about what these young women wanted from the sessions – including a shopping list of food and drink! Much of this was independently organised after planning discussions with us and with a small amount of encouragement from one of the youth workers.

Building emotional safety

One of the concerns we had, along with the youth workers, was ensuring emotional safety for both the young women joining the group and the young facilitators. After completing risk assessments, and through knowledge gained through the 1:1 work and attending the youth club, it was clear that there was a risk that information may be over-shared, confidentiality could be breached with the result of increasing risk, and young women had the potential to be triggered or re-traumatised. In response, it was agreed with the co-facilitators that they would take part in two preparation/training sessions that would cover the role of a facilitator,

basic safeguarding, facilitation skills and the professional boundaries they would need – and that would look different to the usual way they behave in a youth club setting. When the younger women joined, the first session followed on from this and established a group agreement, confidentiality remits, and encouraged young women to use the third person to share their experiences in a way that was safe for them.

The value of positive peer relationships

The group has grown slowly based on trusted relationships with the young facilitators and the youth workers. We know from experience the importance of allowing time for a new organisation and professional to build trust in a new environment. So far the group has explored relationships and emotions and all young women have been able to share their experiences and wealth of knowledge in a way that is safe for them. We have also noticed trust and support building between the young women as they have conversations with and offer advice to each other in the presence, but without the input, of the adult facilitators/youth workers. These conversations have emerged organically, as a result of planned activities, and included young women challenging each other's views in healthy ways and supporting one another through difficult situations. This was particularly pertinent for one young woman who was reluctant to join the group at first and struggled to build peer relationships. At the end of the first term of sessions, she said: "I'm pleased to see myself speaking to other people, I don't normally do that" and "it has been helpful to realise that I'm not the only one going through these things". Other feedback received was that young people enjoyed "talking about real issues" and "being able to give my opinion". The young facilitators all stated that they felt more confident in their abilities to communicate, lead and take part in team activities.

The aim for this group is to continue to build and create a space where young women can seek support from professionals and their peers. It is too early to tell the impact this might have on the contextual issues identified in the local area and within peer groups, however, early indications show increased positive peer relationships, increased support being offered through these relationships and, particularly from the peer facilitators, an increased ability to know when to share issues/concerns with adults to seek support for their peers. One young woman changed her mind about being referred for counselling after a session looking at anger and difficult emotions where she was able to speak with her peers about their views on mental health and therapeutic support.

In addition, the issue of relationship abuse has been discussed openly, unhelpful ideas have been challenged within the group, and support services have been identified and shared. It is hoped that the combination of these outcomes will contribute to the young women's understanding of relationship abuse and ability to seek support for themselves and others.