

Working with peers

Developing safeguarding practice to work with peer relationships – from defining peer groups and peer mapping to peer assessment

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Laying the foundations

What is a peer group? What do young people feel when talking about their peers? How can we build on the protective capacity of young people's friends? Here we introduce safeguarding practice that works *with* peer relationships, underpinned by the values of Contextual Safeguarding, including ethical and legal considerations

Harm can happen in peer group contexts and peer relationships. This can mean that practitioners focus only on identifying, assessing and responding to the risk and harm posed by peer groups and friends. But, peer relationships can also be protective and relevant to safeguarding (Latimer, Adams-Elias and Firmin, 2020). For this reason young people might experience 'peers paradox'. This is where their peer relationships can provide both a source of harm and support (Brodie, Latimer and Firmin, 2020).

Of course, it is important to address the harm that young people are exposed to, or responsible for, in their peer relationships because it is likely to impact their safety, well-being and development. But to do this, we need to understand the peer relationships and the dynamics of peer groups from both a risk and strengths perspective. This information can then inform assessment, planning and response interventions with young people and their peer groups who may be exposed to extra-familial harm. If we do this, we are more likely to address the underlying conditions of abuse, rather than only the presenting behaviours. This is a core component of Contextual Safeguarding.

'Peer mapping' has been developed as useful for depicting peer connections (Firmin, 2019; Sloane et al, 2019). Building on maps, peer group assessment frameworks support practitioners to understand the relationships between young people and the dynamics of those groups. England's statutory child protection guidance was amended in 2018 to recommend that young people who are connected to shared contexts, or thematic concerns, should be considered together during assessments. Peer mapping and peer assessment can be useful tools to support this and help contribute to increased safety for young people. They can enable you to:

- Better understand young people's experiences in peer groups and the dynamics of peer relationships. This can lead to support in peer relationships, focussed on creating safety and reducing harm
- Target the wider environment to bring about protection and safety around the peer group, rather than seeking to change or sever young people's relationships
- Contribute to identify which context we should focus on for support and/or intervention

Defining peer groups, peer mapping and peer assessment

Before undertaking safeguarding work with peer relationships, we need to define the key elements of this practice. Here we look at: what is a peer group? what is peer mapping? and what are peer assessments?

What is a peer group?

Young people's relationships can be fluid in nature and often differ according to the contexts in which friendships and connections form. For this reason, we need to think about the different ways of defining or identifying a 'peer group'. A group can be defined based on:

- Shared identifying factors – e.g. being the 'popular' kids in school or a group who go 'missing' together
- Sharing a common context – e.g. attending the same school or in the same location when missing from home
- Being self-selected – e.g. young people who choose to spend time with one another as friends, or young people who actively choose to 'hang-out' in particular contexts (Kindermann and Gest, 2009)

All of these groupings are valid and may overlap, so it is important that we stay reflective about the make-up of the group and to ask stakeholders and young people who else might be included. Remember that just because we might see something one way, it doesn't mean it is a true reflection of a young person's experience. Being clear on how a peer group is being defined is important for how you approach peer mapping.

What is peer mapping?

Peer mapping is a visual tool which can help you better understand peer connections. We could think about a peer map as being like a genogram but for peer groups instead of family members. Although a genogram helpfully informs us of family connections and may support a wider child and family assessment, it does not complete the assessment. In the same way, a peer map alone does not constitute an assessment and should form part of a wider assessment process.

Like genograms, peer mapping can help you to begin to think about not only who is in the group but also the nature of the relationships within it – such as the strengths and influences as well as the wider social conditions around the group. The purpose of doing this is always to inform safeguarding decisions (rather than, for example advance criminal prosecution) and it is important that this remains the focus throughout.

Summary

- Peer relationships have a positive and negative influence on young people's experiences of safety
- Peer relationships/groups can be defined in different ways
- Peer mapping is one approach to organise information about peer relationships to support assessments

From peer mapping to peer assessment

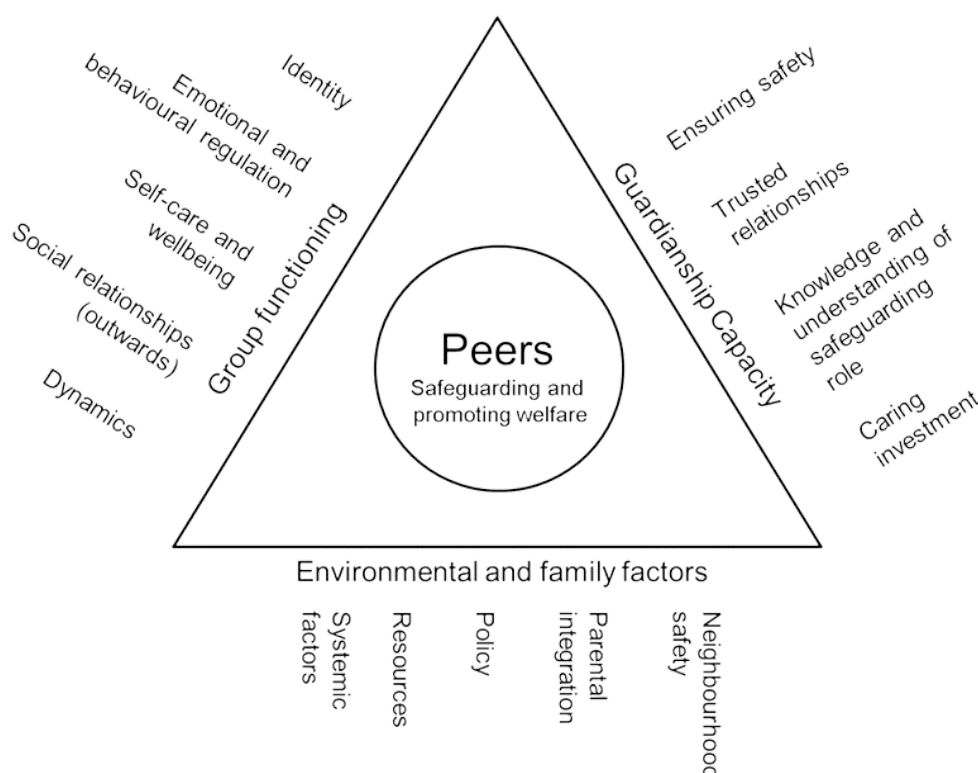
A peer assessment enables practitioners to assess the safety of a connected group of young people, helping to shed light on the contextual dynamics of young people's safety. They can help practitioners to gain an insight into the nature of extra-familial contexts; organise complex information about young people's relationships (often supported by peer maps in a visual format); and foreground the environmental drivers of the harm that young people face. For more detailed guidance on peer mapping, you can access resources on the Contextual Safeguarding network. Here we summarise key principles.

When assessing peer groups, we need to draw on factors beyond those traditionally used in child and family assessments. Figure one below outlines the different elements that should be considered within a peer group assessment.

These fall across three domains:

1. Group functioning – the dynamics of the peer group itself, how they relate to each other and their presentation to others.
2. Guardianship capacity – the capacity, willingness and ability of guardians to keep the group safe. These will vary depending on the context in which the peer group is formed. For example, school staff or a local youth club.
3. Environmental and family factors – which other factors affect the safety of the young people? These may relate to the local neighbourhood context, the policies in place to safeguard them, the support of their parents or systemic and structural factors e.g. poverty or racism.

Figure one: Peer assessment triangle



Engaging Young People

What do young people think about practitioners finding out about and working with their peers, to try to increase safety? We undertook a survey within young people across the Scale-Up sites. We asked whether workers having a better understanding of friendships and peers could help keep young people safe. 81% responded with yes, 17% said 'maybe' and only 2% said no. This suggests that young people see some relevance in thinking about this context, but the important question is - how should we do this?

"I'd just like to say that I definitely think the idea of peer assessment is a great idea, if it's applied in the right situation, in the right way, it can be really effective and it could save a child from being in this situation, so I do think it's important to start implementing this in the right places." - Young person

What do young people say about peer assessment?

We have spoken to young people in the Scale-Up sites where peer assessments have taken place. We wanted to know what they think about this, to inform how the practice develops.

The key messages coming from young people are that safeguarding work which engages with peer relationships and peer groups should be:

"they could have the wrong person getting in trouble just because they hang around with them" - Young person

- **Collaborative:** Young people need to be partners in the process
- **Relational:** Trusted relationships are essential - you need to have the right person asking the questions
- **Incremental:** Assessment should be built up over time- don't expect to get answers to all the questions straight away.
- **Grounded in evidence:** Assessment should be built on young people's opinions
- **Inclusive of parents:** Parents should be involved and included in the process
- **Strengths based:** Built on young people's interests and recognise positives
- **Respectful of privacy:** Only share when there is a 'need to know'
- **Group based:** Recognise the value of supporting whole peer groups and offering peer group interventions rather than only working with young people individually

What do young people say about peer mapping?

We also spoke to young people about peer mapping. Young people shared concerns about how peer mapping is conducted. These concerns highlight the for practice is underpinned by the values of Contextual Safeguarding.

Young people felt that peer mapping was not done in the right way, it could lead to stereotyping, profiling and labelling. They made the point that young people in a peer group are not all alike and so should not be judged by association.

Young people felt it was important to consider:

- **Information sharing** - who has access to the peer map and what the implications might be of this being shared (e.g. potential criminal outcomes if shared with police)?
- **Purpose** - what is the point of mapping the peer group? Could it be more harmful? (e.g. what if it was shared with the police?)
- **Consent processes** - young people have asked how they would know they were on a map and what other information about them is included
- **Shifting dynamics** - young people questioned whether professionals would understand or be able to keep up with the fluid and shifting dynamics in peer relationships

Key learning

If you are developing peer group mapping and assessment we would advise you to start by engaging with the young people in your local area and those accessing your services to work alongside you, so that your approach is informed by, and works for, them.

- **Create a clear threshold policy** for levels of harm in peer groups: Young people said there has to be a real reason to assess a group of friends (e.g. Hackney Wellbeing Framework on CS network)
- **Involve those who hold trusted relationships:** Consider if a trusted adult who already has a relationship with the young person/peer group could be responsible for doing a peer assessment
- **Understand power dynamics:** Acknowledge that young people sometimes find social care involvement to be intrusive and find ways to build their trust
- **Collaboration:** Design the process to be collaborative and supportive or there is a risk it could cause young people to shut off and share very little with professionals
- **Clear consent processes need to be in place:** Young people need to know what is involved and for what reason
- **What will come after this assessment:** Is there a clear pathway for responding with peer groups and a process for agreeing the changes you want to bring about?

Applying the values to work with peers


Since Contextual Safeguarding approaches have first been talked about, the idea of working with peer groups and peer relationships has been eagerly embraced. But, as practice has developed, we have seen – in some instances – that peer mapping and peer assessment have not been sufficiently underpinned by the values of Contextual Safeguarding. This has the potential to lead to problematic practice which could inadvertently lean more towards surveillance rather than support. To address this, we encourage anyone working with peer relationships to consider how their approaches are aligned with and uphold the values of Contextual Safeguarding.

Below is a checklist of things to consider when working with peers. It can provide a helpful foundation for making sure you are applying the Contextual Safeguarding values when you are undertaking peer mapping, assessment, planning or intervention. If, after consideration and reflection, you answer no to the questions posed, it may be helpful to pause on the activity or practice until you feel confident that you are able to address the identified gap. Undertaking work with peer groups and peer relationships without applying the values cannot be considered a Contextual Safeguarding approach and could even damage relationships and undermine young people's safety – even if this not intended.

Collaboration

Peer mapping and assessing should foreground the principle of working with young people and their families, rather than 'doing to'. It is important to think about how you will include young people and how this process will be communicated so that it is a collaborative process. You should not prioritise information or intelligence gathering over including young people in the process. If you cannot include or inform young people, then it is important to ask why you are doing it and what you are trying to achieve.

Collaboration check-list

- Approach is designed to work alongside young people and parents/cares ☐
- Peer mapping and assessment process communicated with young people and parents/carers ☐
- If so, how? 



Strengths-based

Strengths-based assessments and plans should include a focus on how to build on existing and potential strengths and not just respond to the concerns. This means actively exploring and highlighting the strengths, protective elements, and opportunities for support within peer relationships and groups, not just focussing on identifying the risks, deficits or concerns. Crucially, identified strengths should be considered as part of the plans to build safety, either with individual young people or the peer group.

Strengths-based check-list

- Peer mapping and assessing surface strengths of young people's relationships ☐
- Peer mapping and assessment process identifies supportive and protective relationships ☐
- If so, how? ☐



Grounded in lived-experience

Sometimes, the views of young people may be at odds with adult or professional perceptions, but young people's experiences and perceptions should still be acknowledged and valued. When there are differences in view points between professionals and young people on what is happening and how it should be responded to, work should focus on engaging a young person or peer group so that alternative perspectives can develop. Both practitioners and young people need to have the space to develop a critically reflective approach to what is happening and what needs to happen to create safety. Having safe and trusted relationships and spaces are very important to enabling this. It is important that you find out who is best placed to engage young people in these conversations, so that they are respectful and based on mutual trust.

Grounded in lived experiences check-list

- Are young people's views and experiences foregrounded? ☐
- Is this evident in how information is recorded? ☐
- Are the workers that young people trust active in the process? ☐
- Is the process led by young people's own needs, experiences and goals? ☐



Rights-based

The process of mapping and assessing peer relationships must consider young people's rights and how those rights are upheld.

Some specific rights to consider include:

- **Acting in a child's best interests** must be the driving priority in all decisions and actions, including work with peers. Before undertaking mapping and assessment, you must be clear that the purpose and rationale are aligned with this.
- **Protection from violence, abuse, and neglect.** Harm which occurs in the peer context should be viewed from a child welfare perspective and responded to as a safeguarding issue
- **Freedom of association** means that every child has the right to meet with other children and to join groups and organisations, as long as this does not stop other people from enjoying their rights
- **Rights to privacy** suggests that no child should be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy. Before adding a child to a peer map and committing that to record, it is important to question whether they need to be included.

Rights-based check-list

- Is this action in the best interests of all of the children who may be a part of the process?

☐

- Is the decision rooted in child welfare rather than gathering intelligence?

☐

- Is the focus protection from violence and abuse rather than crime prevention?

☐

- Does this apply for children that may be viewed as responsible for harm?

☐

- Does the outcome explore strengthening and making associations safer rather than leaning towards separating peer relationships based on risk?

☐

- Does the young person need to be included?

☐

- Is the reason based on evidence?

☐


Ecological

As part of mapping and assessing peer groups, you will need to consider the wider 'eco-systems' that a young person or peer group exists within – like their school, neighbourhood or family, and the influence that these have over what is happening in the peer group. The Context Weighting tool (see guidance on the Scale-up Toolkit) can support you in considering the interplay between different contexts. Doing this, you may discover that the context most in need of a safeguarding response is not in fact the peer group, but another contexts that relates to the peer group. An example of this is realising that you need to address the high levels of exclusions in a school, rather than just working with a peer group who have been impacted by discriminatory exclusion practice. In this example, it could be that school policies and attitudes towards towards certain young people – including racism and sexism – is the underlying cause of the harm experienced by the peer group. As a result, the 'social conditions' that need targeting to bring about safety is the school context. The goal of the work would then be to create a school context where, rather than facing discrimination, the peer group could be included and supported.

As with all safeguarding activity it is important that there is a clear rationale and evidence for starting and continuing the work. If you start out assessing a peer group and later find that another context should now be the focus – discuss this with your partners and decide how to shift the focus. Remember – just because you started out looking at peer dynamics, this should not deter you from changing to addressing another context, if the evidence of what is driving the harm points to this.

Ecological focus check-list

- Does mapping consider locations and how these are shaped by inequalities? ☐
- Do processes consider and respond to structural harm? ☐
- Does it consider discrimination, poverty, racism, sexism and ableism? ☐
- Are you confident peer processes don't contribute to this? ☐



Legal and ethical considerations

Purpose

Be clear about why you are undertaking peer mapping and peer assessment. Your work should be driven by a child welfare approach and the objective of safeguarding should be maintained throughout. Mapping and assessing young people can align with the Human Rights Act and GDPR, under the protection of health, if the purpose is to safeguard the children who are subject to it. But mapping peer groups to gather intelligence for the purpose of crime detection or prevention would directly contravene the Human Rights Act and GDPR. Additionally, mapping and assessing peer groups for this purpose could lead to the criminalisation of young people who should be given a safeguarding response.

Process

It is important to have a clear record of the process which should be accessible to everyone involved. The process should outline why peer work takes place, when it happens, how it happens and who is involved. For support in developing this, detailed guidance is available in the Peer Group assessment guidance published on the Contextual Safeguarding Network.

Proportionate

Like any child and family assessment, the approach to peer mapping and assessing should develop over time in a reflective way, as new information emerges. It should also be proportionate. Consider whether the processes you develop allow for this level of sensitivity to evidence, as it develops. Consider also whether it allows you to respond appropriately to the severity of harm peer experienced by a group.

Relational

Children and young people have told us that trusted relationships are key. They want us to consider who is best placed to engage with them in about mapping and assessing their peer relationships. Find out who these trusted adults are, and collaborate with them to engage young people in the process. Consider too how you can earn young people's trust and reassure them that you will respect their experiences and what they share.

Recording

Consider how and where you will record information. This will be different if you are creating safety for an individual young person (by considering their peers) or if you are working directly with a peer group to create safety there. But a general point to remember, is that recording *themes* about safety and harm in a context – rather than personal information about individuals linked to that context – is a good way of protecting personal data.

Conclusion

There are many opportunities to develop peers work within child protection practice and we hope this guide increases your confidence and inspires you to get going. We end with a diagram which brings shows how peer work can be incorporated across different stages of the safeguarding system.

First, here is some information to help you get the most out of it:

'Level 1' refers to work with individual young people and their families (the traditional approach to case work).

'Level 2' refers to practice developed through Contextual Safeguarding, where a context, like a peer group, school or neighbourhood - rather than an individual child and family - is the focus of the work. To enable this, some local authorities have developed safeguarding systems that can take referrals for contexts, assess those contexts for safety and harm and then respond with interventions to create safety not just for those young people who are open to services, but potentially for all young people who associate with it.

Although Level 1 and Level 2 work relate to each other, they often require different methods of assessment and response. This is because they have different aims - so while the aim of Level 1 work is safety for a young person and their family, in Level 2 work the aim is to bring about safety for a context - like making a peer group safer for all the young people who are part of that group.

Level One

Are peers referred to in the local 'thresholds' policy?

Does this supports multi-agency partners to consider the role of peer relationships when making referrals for children impacted by extra-familial harm?

Can it be used as a basis for decision-making during assessment and planning?

Does the referral template for individual young people and their families support multi-agency referrers to consider the role of peer relationships?

Does the referral template prompt professionals to include relevant visual and pen narratives of a the peer relations of a young person when there are the extra-familial concerns?

Does the referral template guide the referrer to undertake context weighting to inform decision making?

Does the child and family assessment consider peer relationships- including strengths alongside risks/concerns?

Do assessment tools support engagement with young people in relation to their peer relationships?

Are partners who hold trusted relationships with the young person and their peers supported to engage young person in the process?

Does the assessment invite context weighting, including the peer group, to inform decision making?

Are parents being engaged in discussion around their child's peer relationships?

Does the plan support the young person to build/maintain safe peer relationships, and support them to understand their own peer needs?

Does the plan consider support for parents in relation to their child's peer relationships?

Is there a clear outcome goal outlining what are you trying to change or achieve? For example enhancing young people's understanding of safety in peer relationships or building on the support of existing peers?

Is there a process in place for linking up any actions related to an individual young person with those directed at the peer group?

Are there interventions available to engage the young person in thinking about their peer relationships? Do these seek to strengthen protective relationships and address dynamics within their peer relationships? e.g.:

- direct work with young people utilising a trusted adult or service who has a good relationship with the young person to explore peer relationships
- enhancing parents/carers' ability to support positive peer relationships



Level Two

Is there a thresholds policy for contexts as well as for individuals? Does this include what a different severity of harm would look like for a peer group?

Can the policy inform decision-making about peer group assessments and responses?

Could it support escalating contextual concerns to strategic forums?

Is there a process for referring peer groups for assessment and response?

Does the referral template prompt professionals to include visual and pen narratives of a peer group where there are extra-familial concerns?

Does the referral template guide the referrer to undertake context weighting to inform decision making?

Does peer mapping form part of a wider assessment process (rather than being a stand alone activity)?

Is the peer group engaged with the assessment process? Are they involved and informed?

Are parents supported to engage with the peer assessment process?

Are partners who hold trusted relationships with the peer group supported to engage young people in the process?

Does the assessment template guide the practitioner to undertake context weighting to inform decision making?

Can a plan be developed to reduce risk and increase safety in the peer group?

Does the plan outline clear goals for the peer group?

Does the plan detail the best partners to engage with and deliver work with the peer group?

Are there mechanisms in place for reviewing the findings of the peer group assessment and plan?

Is there a process for linking with work in other contexts (including individual young people's plans) relevant to this work?

Are there interventions available which can engage with the peer group (or members of the peer group)?

Are these designed to increase safety in contexts which might compromise the groups' safety?

Are there mechanisms to support the parents/carers of the peer groups to capitalise on their protection and support?