Peer support interventions for safeguarding

A Scoping Review

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Introduction

Professionals who work with young people experiencing extra-familial harm are increasingly recognising the significance of peer relationships, and the potential value in developing safeguarding interventions that harness peer support and protect against peer-to-peer abuse. The academic evidence base provides a starting point for this development of practice.

This review of relevant literature presents five forms of peer (support) intervention, along with their key features, potential benefits and considerations for practice. These forms are:

- Peer education
- Peer mentoring
- Group work
- Community interventions
- Online peer support interventions

All of the above contain an element of peer support, and can be used within a strengths-based approach to practice. However, practitioners use varying methods to facilitate peer support, and some forms of intervention are more explicit and formal about the supportive role young people are encouraged to take.

This review was conducted alongside a study with voluntary sector organisation Safer London, to consider the opportunities to develop safeguarding interventions based on peer support. A briefing summarising these findings can be found on the Contextual Safeguarding Network.

Review structure

This document summarises the research background to the review, and its methodology, before turning to the findings and conclusions.

Definitions

'Young people' refers to people aged between 10 and 24 inclusive. This aligns with the World Health Organisation's use of the term, and refers to a demographic group recognised increasingly in UK policy and practice – for instance, by the Mental Health Taskforce to the NHS in England (2016)

For the purposes of this report, the term 'peer' describes a relationship between two or more young people. These young people will be similar ages, and have a social connection of some kind. Although, according to this definition, both these conditions are necessary, it gives scope for relative closeness / distance of age and social relationships. The below grid provides examples.

	Relatively close social connection	Relatively distant social connection
Relatively close in age	A small group of 'best friends', who are the same age, who live in the area, have family connections, and attend the same school.	Two young people, a couple of months apart in age, who have never spoken, but attend the same the school, in different school year groups.
Relatively distant in age	Two siblings who have lived together their whole lives but are four years apart in age. (This is an example of how peer and familial networks can overlap.)	Two young people, several years apart in age, who live locally to each other, and spend time in the same park after school, but have never met.

Table 1 Examples of variance within peer relationship

Background

Young people's peer relationships can be a source of risk and protection (Barter et al, 2015; Korkiamaki, 2011). For these reasons, peer relationships are relevant to young people's safety and wellbeing – and, by extension, to safeguarding responses. However, statutory safeguarding interventions in the UK typically focus on individual young people and their families (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin, 2015) This narrow view constrains the ability of professional services to recognise and respond to risk and protection within young people's peer networks, and this is particularly inappropriate for adolescents facing risks from outside their home and/or family (Johnson, 2013; Drew, 2020; Brandon et al, 2020). In some cases, a peer group, and the behaviours and attitudes within it, may be the most salient context for a young person at risk (Firmin, 2019).

The above findings are foundational to the Contextual Safeguarding research programme. The programme asks: to what extent can a welfare-orientated safeguarding system respond to extra-familial harm in adolescence by addressing the context of this harm, rather than focusing solely on the individual young people experiencing the harm? Such a system would require services to respond to the extra-familial contexts that cause or facilitate harm to young people (Firmin, 2017) This would include, but is not limited to, working with young people in the context of their peer relationships. Within a Contextual Safeguarding system, practitioners could, when appropriate, intervene to affect multiple, connected young people. To this end, this review examines evidence of 'peer intervention' within the academic literature to guide service development.

In addition to Contextual Safeguarding, this review is informed by other strains within the relevant research, in particular: a questioning approach to the preoccupation with 'risk' within statutory safeguarding, and a foregrounding of participatory approaches.

Critical histories of UK safeguarding policy and practice over recent decades have highlighted a focus on risk, which leads professional interventions to prioritise its avoidance (Parton, 2010; Thom, Sales and Pearce, 2007; Case, 2006; Turnbull and Spence, 2011) To partially rebalance the scales, and to avoid portraying young people's peer relationships as relevant only to the extent that they are problematic, this research emphasises peer support as a basis for intervention. This does not preclude a keen awareness of risk within young people's peer networks; it increases the scope to respond to this risk by, when appropriate, harnessing the protective nature and/or potential of peer relationships.

This project heeds also the importance of young people's participation in decisions for their protection and care, and in research. Participatory research into Child Sexual Exploitation highlights the value of young people's meaningful participation in all work about / for them (Warrington, 2013; Hallett, 2015; Brodie et al, 2016)

Methodology

A scoping review

This review is a 'scoping study' in that it aims to summarise and share current research findings, and also highlight the gaps in the evidence base. The latter product is considered worthwhile in its own right (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) SCIE's concept of the 'systematic map' is also relevant: these 'maps' describe the range of existing literature available, including gaps, and undertake analysis in line with the amount and quality of literature available (Clapton, Rutter and Sharif, 2009)

This review does not adhere to the narrower concept of a 'systematic review', which aims to provide a complete summary of all the relevant literature in a precisely defined field, and often excludes literature based on strict methodological requirements. However, this review does uphold the need for transparency about the decisions made in searching for and identifying literature to include within the review.

The scope of this review

The review focused on English language and UK based literature post-2000, in recognition of the importance of the policy and practice context in shaping safeguarding interventions.

These interventions may relate to work that is educative, preventive, or aimed at the reduction of harm.

The review chose to include items relating to physical, emotional and sexual violence and abuse. A young person's vulnerability is not restricted to any one type of violence. There are 'frequent overlaps and intersections' (Firmin, Warrington and Pearce, 2016, p.2321) between issues such as school bullying, familial and community violence, trafficking, gang association and sexual exploitation.

The review has focussed on voluntary sector, rather than statutory, interventions for two reasons: Safer London is a voluntary sector organisation; and previous reviews within the safeguarding field suggest a more developed practice framework for work with multiple young people within the voluntary and youth work sectors.

Search terms included combinations of the following: "peers",
"young people", "youth", "adolescents", "young people", and "influence", "support", "led", "interventions", "protect*", "safeguard*", "voluntary".

A list of databases and grey literature sources searched as part of the review is appended to this report. In addition, a small number of journals were hand searched and recommendations were sought from individuals working in the field.

Include	Exclude
- English language literature - Literature post-2000 - UK practice and interventions focused on peer-led / peer-based support - Literature focusing on voluntary, youth work approaches (in light of experience with other reviews)	- Sources that discuss peer relationships generally - Literature focused on statutory interventions - Literature focused on the experience of abuse

Table 2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Number and type of studies

A total sample of 45 items were identified for the purposes of the review. The literature consists of a 'core' sample of defined interventions, which is situated within a broader body of literature that provides insight into questions of definition and conceptualisation (Brodie et al, 2016) Some publications sit within more than one of the categories below:
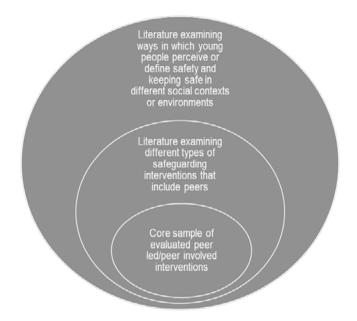

Figure 1 The core sample within the literature identified

Limitations

Research into adolescent development highlights the significance of young people's peers. In the UK, this corresponds to a decline in the significance of family ties as young people seek independence (Coleman, 2010) This increase in peer influence, has implications both for young people's involvement in inflicting harmful behaviour on others, and their experiences of victimisation (Firmin, Warrington and Pearce, 2015; Latchford et al, 2016)

Peer interventions have been developed and applied in a wide range of fields, in part due to a perceived reluctance by young people to engage with traditional forms of service delivery. These fields include:

- Tobacco and alcohol misuse (MacArthur et al, 2013);
- Mental health services for young offenders (Porteous, Adler and Davidson, 2015);
- School bullying (Cowie and Oztug, 2008; Salmivalli, 2010)

The academic literature uses varied and undefined language to describe peer interventions. The following terms, all of which can be understood in multiple ways, are used within the literature: peer support, peer education, and peer mentoring. Within the literature, links are often made to participatory practice of different kinds.

However, there is agreement across the literature that, while there is a certain logic in developing peer-based interventions, the evidence base regarding their effectiveness is both limited in scale and variable in terms of the results (Latchford et al, 2016) The issues are partly methodological and similar to the problems encountered in other areas of policy and practice, including the short-term nature of many interventions, and the lack of associated funding.

There are additional difficulties in evaluating safeguarding interventions including ethical issues, and a lack of descriptive information about safeguarding and statutory social work practice (Ferguson, 2009; Parton, 2010)

This existing knowledge base also suggests that there are a number of limitations associated with this review. These include the definition of terms (Kelly and Karsna, 2018), the wide range of disciplinary approaches and the variety of settings that are potentially involved (Brodie et al, 2016)

More generally, the review process has found only a small literature base and a lack of evaluated, peer-based interventions. Despite this, the review identifies various strands of research that can contribute to our understanding of the role of peers within safeguarding interventions.

Findings

The context of intervention: the 'peers paradox'

The literature reviewed emphasises the complexity of working with peer networks that can represent risk and protection simultaneously. Various studies highlight the prevalence of peer-to-peer abuse; for instance, Radford et al (2011) found that 66% of contact sexual abuse experienced by young people under 17 was instigated by someone under 18. However, young people are frequently a source of practical and emotional support to each other, including in response to abuse (Allnock, 2013). We have called this a 'peers paradox'.

This tension is plain when considering young people's disclosures of abuse. Multiple studies into peer support highlight the likelihood that young people will disclose abuse to their peers before, or instead of, talking to adults (Ibid.; Beckett et al, 2013; Jobe and Gorin, 2013) However, social norms about the consequences of 'snitching' also prevent some young people from talking about abuse (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019) This highlights the influence of young people's peers, and the value of understanding this influence.

Yet peer influence cannot be understood without reference to the physical and social settings in which this influence is played out. Young people can connect a fear of other young people to a fear of navigating their neighbourhoods (Hackney Wick Youth Voice, 2017) And young people's peer relationships may make sense of, and perpetuate, violence within a specific neighbourhood to which they feel belonging (Parkes and Conolly, 2013) Effective safeguarding therefore must consider the young people's wider safety and context before determining the best route for intervention; peer interventions may have little impact if behaviour is predominantly shaped by the young people's locations.

Forms of peer intervention and how they relate to each other

Within the literature reviewed, five forms of peer intervention were identified:

1.   Peer education
2.   Peer mentoring
3.   Group work
4.   Community interventions
5.   Online Peer Support Interventions

An overview of each of these is presented below, including potential benefits and other considerations. However, in practice, they could be combined. Bystander approaches, which have been used in US schools and universities as a form of sexual violence prevention, demonstrate this. Some programmes combine peer education, group work, and community intervention. Katz (2011, p.691) describes how Mentors in Violence Prevention trains 'student leaders' to educate their peers in groups, with the goal of changing attitudes across the school community. Additionally, the internet can be used to facilitate any of the other four forms of peer interventions.

Services centred on peer support can take various forms – but there are some common themes. Peer support interventions generally provide space for young people to actively support each other, albeit with some preparation and oversight by adults (who could be professionals or volunteers) This preparation could include: designing the programme and deciding who to invite; providing a physical or virtual place for young people to meet as part of the programme; providing training and ground rules; seeking consent from participants; assessing risk; delineating objectives and providing ways for the support to end. Oversight

could involve: moderating conversations (online or in person); monitoring the relationships to see if they are supportive and what the result of this is; leading sessions and/or providing content and structure for sessions; being available to the young people to offer one-to-one support as and when is necessary; continuous risk assessment and making changes as required. All peer support interventions reviewed struck a balance between young person autonomy and adult oversight.

Peer interventions could be designed for young people who already know each other, or for young people brought together by the intervention. Equally, they can, but do not always involve group work. The below Venn diagram illustrates the potential overlap between these two factors.
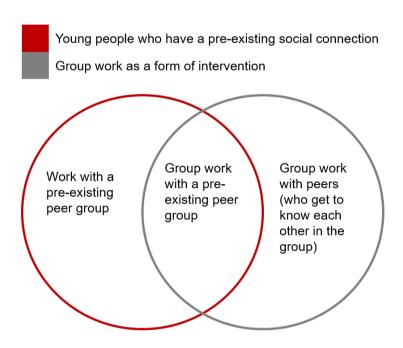

Figure 2 Peer interventions can, but do not always, involve work with young people who know each other

The interventions could also actively involve young people in the design and delivery of the programme, which could have added benefits in making the programme relevant and engaging for participants. This approach also gives young people opportunities to develop organisational and leadership skills, and model these to others. The interventions need not have 'peer support' as a single, stated aim; the focus of the programme could be therapeutic, based on a specific activity (football, drama, etc.), or on a shared community or political objective.

Peer education

What is it?

> Peer education is '…a process in which young people undertake informal or organised educational activities with their peers (those similar to themselves in age, background or interests […] aimed at developing young people's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and skills.' (adapted from Youth Peer Education Network, 2005, p.13, cited in Bovarnick with D'Arcy, 2017)

Potential benefits

Young people are often best able to communicate with their peers, and can add credibility, authenticity and acceptability to educative and preventive interventions.

The involvement of young people in designing and delivering programmes also equips them with new skills and enables them to become active agents of change (Bovarnick with D'Arcy, 2017)

Additional considerations

Engagement requires resource to ensure that young people are given suitable training and help, and that their work takes place in a supportive context.

Peer mentoring

What is it?

'Peer mentors develop supportive relationships and act as role models with mentees who share similar attributes or types of experience' (South, Bagnall and Woodhall, 2017, p. 218)

Potential benefits

Within an evaluated peer mentoring programme, young people reported that they enjoyed their time with mentors, who were perceived as friendly, less judgemental than other staff. They were able to build relationships based on their shared experience of the local community as well as experience of abuse. It also an opportunity for the young people to enjoy spending time which each other, which was a positive outcome in itself (Buck, Lawrence and Raganese, 2017)

Additional considerations

Participation in some mentoring programmes has not lead to measurable improvements in young people's outcomes (Roberts et al, 2004; DuBois and Felner, 2016; Mezey et al, 2017)

Peer mentoring on its own is unlikely to make change at a community level. Cowie and Oztug (2008)'s evaluation of peer mentoring in schools does found 'little evidence that the presence of a peer support system enhanced feelings of safety in the school population' (Ibid, p.1) The schools needed to combine peer mentoring with practical changes as a result of the insights gained, e.g. changes to the toilets, where the young people felt unsafe.

Group work

What is it?

Young people form a group face-to-face or online. The group is organised and supported by adults to some degree; peer supporters may also play an active role in bringing the group together around a particular agenda. Young people could be invited due to shared experiences or attributes. Groups facilitated by peers can provide opportunities for peer education and youth leadership (Warrington and Thomas, 2017)

Potential benefits

Individual outcomes including: self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-making skills (Westergaard, 2013)

Social outcomes such as: building relationships between young people who view themselves as members of different social groups (Sheppard and Clibbens, 2015; Turner and Cameron, 2016)

Research focused on safeguarding suggests there are also therapeutic benefits. Hickle and Hallett (2016) argue for the application of a 'harm reduction principle' in work with sexually exploited young people to reconnect young people to peer support and group work that can increase their awareness of victimisation and engage young people in new activities.

Groups may also provide the opportunity to experiment with different methods of work – art, drama, music, poetry – which offer young people different ways of expressing their feelings as well as developing new skills (Smeaton, 2013)

Additional considerations

Concerns have been raised regarding the potential stigma arising from group work with young people who share vulnerabilities, including those relating to safeguarding. This would need to be carefully managed in consultation with the young people attendees.

There is a distinction to be drawn between bringing together young people who already spend time together (a pre-existing peer group), and bringing together young people who do not know each other.

Community interventions

What is it?

These approaches are often described as community development, and/or link into existing youth work provision, rather than interventions focussed on peers. However, there are important commonalities, such as the use of community-based mapping and consultation, to include young people in the identification of spaces and places that they experience as more or less safe, and responses that focus on improving physical environment and resources.

Potential benefits

Evans and Holland (2012) and Holland (2014) argue that such approaches enable understanding of the relationships between formal safeguarding systems, community-based interventions, and informal practices. This in turn leads to a better understanding of community strengths – and potentially, improved design of local interventions. Such projects have been successful in identifying community based suggestions for strengthening local approaches to safeguarding, such as better information for community residents regarding safeguarding, and improved family support, e.g. child care, and better outreach and facilities for young people.

A focus on the community also allows for engagement with young people and their peer networks without putting all the emphasis on young people themselves. This takes pressure away from individual young people to engage with services.

Additional considerations

The individualised nature of most UK safeguarding policy has meant that community

oriented safeguarding has been confined to pilot projects, voluntary organisations and individual teams (Jack and Gill, 2010; Evans and Holland, 2012; Holland, 2014)

Online Peer support interventions online

What is it?

The internet can be used to connect young people to peer support, positive peer groups, and peer education. These forums could be used by young people who already have contact face-to-face, e.g. because they attend the same school or youth club.

Potential benefits

Online forums can reach relatively isolated young people, who would not attend a group face-to-face (Huston and Cowie, 2007)

Young people can engage to varying extents. They could read the information but not comment themselves, they could comment only when asking for support, or they could actively others support (Cyberhus et al, 2012)

Peer support in relation to online harm can be particularly appropriate, in part because adults have – or are perceived to have – less understanding of the online context (Barter et al, 2015)

Additional considerations

Forums require moderation by adults (and trained peer moderators) to: establish guidelines, ensure that young people can report concerns, are not allowed to send harmful communication to one another, and receive support when they ask for it.

As with any group that brings young people together, the young people could subsequently develop informal relationships outside the group, which would not be moderated to the same extent.

Conclusion

Young people's peers are significant within their social worlds, and merit due attention in safeguarding processes and procedures. Young people are actively engaged in negotiating these relationships, which are often influential, can be both positive and negative simultaneously, and change and develop over time and in relation to space.

A range of options are available in terms of peer involvement in safeguarding, and some approaches and interventions will be more or less appropriate to different groups and at different times. The interventions discussed use various methods to involve peers in safeguarding, e.g. group work, or facilitated leadership by young people. They also vary in the extent to which they:

• Are strengths- or deficit- based
• Are participatory
• Connect to young people's social / physical settings
• Work with the complexity of young people's social networks

Accordingly, a peer-based safeguarding intervention could be mapped on the below grid:
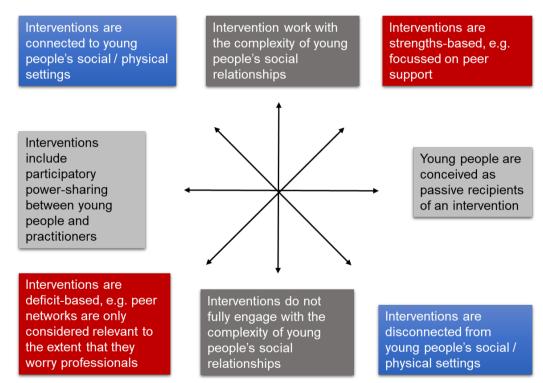

Figure 3 Variables to consider when designing peer interventions with young people

It is important to note that even a peer intervention may not fully engage with the complexity of peer relationships. For instance, a one-to-one mentoring relationship with a relatively disconnected peer may, or may not, promote safety and protection within the peer relationships that matter.

Many elements of service design will depend on the intervention's aims and context: the literature reviewed could not provide a manual for service design. However, the research reviewed demonstrates ways in which safeguarding work with young people can recognise the complexity of their social relationships, the strengths and protection within these relationships, and the ways in which peer networks connect to their social and physical settings.

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