Understanding and responding to ‘extra-familial harm’: a holistic approach

March 2025

The Contextual Safeguarding Network

What is extra-familial harm?

From 2018 onwards, changes to statutory guidance in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have gradually required child-welfare organisations to assess and support young people who experience harm beyond their families. In many ways, this has marked a departure from a family- and parent-oriented child welfare system, that has had a focus on assessing and supporting families and determining the capacity of parents to safeguard children. A focus on extra-familial harm asks professionals to respond to harms that young people experience in relationships and spaces beyond their families and family homes.

Example: Statutory guidance for England and Wales

As an example, statutory guidance for safeguarding children in England and Wales defines extra-familial harm as:

"Harm [that] can occur in a range of extra-familial contexts, including school and other educational settings, peer groups, or within community/public spaces, and/or online. Children may experience this type of harm from other children and/or from adults. Forms of extra-familial harm include exploitation by criminal and organised crime groups and individuals (such as county lines and financial exploitation), serious violence, modern slavery and trafficking, online harm, sexual exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, and the influences of extremism which could lead to radicalisation"

(HM Government, 2023; 67)

Contextual Safeguarding

PLANNING FOR SAFETY
Embedding Risk Outside of the Home (ROTH)
Child Protection Pathways

Durham University

Why can it be useful to think about some harms as 'extra-familial'?

Where harm happens

Young people often encounter these harms, at least in part, in relationships and spaces beyond their family relationships and family home. For example, a young person might be sexually harmed by a peer at school or coerced into harmful activities by an adult in a local park. It makes sense to think of these harms as to some extent 'extra-familial' (outside of the family). But we know that young people's experiences of these harms are often impacted by, and impact, their homes and family lives. For example, a young person who lives in a home where there is domestic violence might spend more time away from home and be less likely to seek support from their caregivers, increasing their vulnerability to harm outside of their family/ family home. Or, a young person might be targeted by peers or adults who want to harm them because of their family relationships with parents or siblings. It is likely then that family relationships and family contexts are significant when it comes to understanding and responding to 'extra-familial' harms such as 'serious youth violence', criminal and sexual exploitation, and trafficking.

The nature of harm

When experienced by young people, these harms can often be categorised as sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse; categories of harm that pre-date the idea of 'extra-familial' harm. And, we know that young people's experiences do not fit into rigid categories – harm can be experienced in a multitude of ways that are sometimes very hard to define, spanning multiple relationships, spaces and taking many forms. In fact, one of the challenges the child-welfare sector has faced since the inclusion of extra-familial harm in statutory guidance is the introduction of a raft of new policies, meetings, panels and responses to different harm types. Many professionals have told us that this is challenging, and that which harm type is a priority often seems to be influenced by factors beyond young people's direct experiences, for example a high-profile news story or change of government priorities. Moreover, naming a harm as physical or sexual abuse is not necessarily sufficient in helping professionals name the impact of the drivers of harm, and develop a response to these.

I think other local authorities as well have become too probably focused on in vogue areas of concern and maybe media hype, and to the detriment then of other things like, for example, your serious youth violence and peer on peer abuse, which probably hadn't had that kind of attention that your CSE has had, for right reasons of course but not necessarily helpful in this world, which seems to be quite knee jerk in terms of how it responds to trends and patterns

(Participant, Securing Safety study)

Shared characteristics of extra-familial harms

So, is there any benefit to thinking about some harms as 'extra-familial'? What is significant here is that these harms often feature shared characteristics, characteristics that child welfare services and their partners have often struggled to engage with. What are these shared characteristics?

Power, consent and exchange

Harm between peers, and harms such as criminal and sexual exploitation, are often characterised by power, exchange and (the restriction or absence of) consent, dynamics that are reflected in domestic and international definitions of exploitation and trafficking. This can look different to the ways that power and exchange play out when young people are harmed in their families. For example, when a young person receives money or gifts for engaging in sexual activity with an adult in the community this often requires a different type of response than when a young person is sexually harmed by a family member.

Methods of accessing and controlling young people

The harm types described as 'extra-familial' often involve a shared set of methods for accessing and controlling young people. These can include:

Peer influence – Peer relationships often become more significant during adolescence. These relationships can be a vital source of support and safety for young people, and they can be relationships in which young people are significantly harmed or come to significantly harm others. It is essential then that the systems in place to protect children are respectful of and can work with young people's friendships and peer networks.

'Grooming' - The term 'grooming' has become politicised in recent years but what it describes is the forming of a relationship to coerce a young person into a harmful activity by exploiting their interests and needs in a dishonest and manipulative way. It is important that the systems in place to protect children recognise the role such relationships can play in informing and controlling young people's decisions and actions.

Gain – Young people may receive tangible or intangible rewards in exchange for engaging in harmful activity (sexual or criminal acts, or harm to others). In cases of exploitation the individual or group harming the young person is likely to also be gaining financially from the abuse. It is important that the systems in place to protect children understand that gain is a common feature of exploitation and is not an indicator of free choice.

Debt and threats – As a result of this 'gain', young people may acquire 'debts' that make it extremely hard for them to walk away from relationships and contact with the people who are harming them. Other threats might be held over young people, such as sexual images or threats to friends and family. The systems in place to protect young people need to be able to work with young people to protect them from the violence and coercion of 'debt' and other threats.

Choice – A young person may appear to have chosen to engage in harmful activity, they may not perceive the activity as harmful or abusive, and they may be gaining from it materially or emotionally but these choices are often constrained. This is commonly misidentified by the systems in place to protect children as consent, for example professionals might say "The young person continues to put themselves at risk." The systems in place to protect children need to be able to recognise these dynamics so that young people are not blamed or criminalised for their experiences of extra-familial harm.

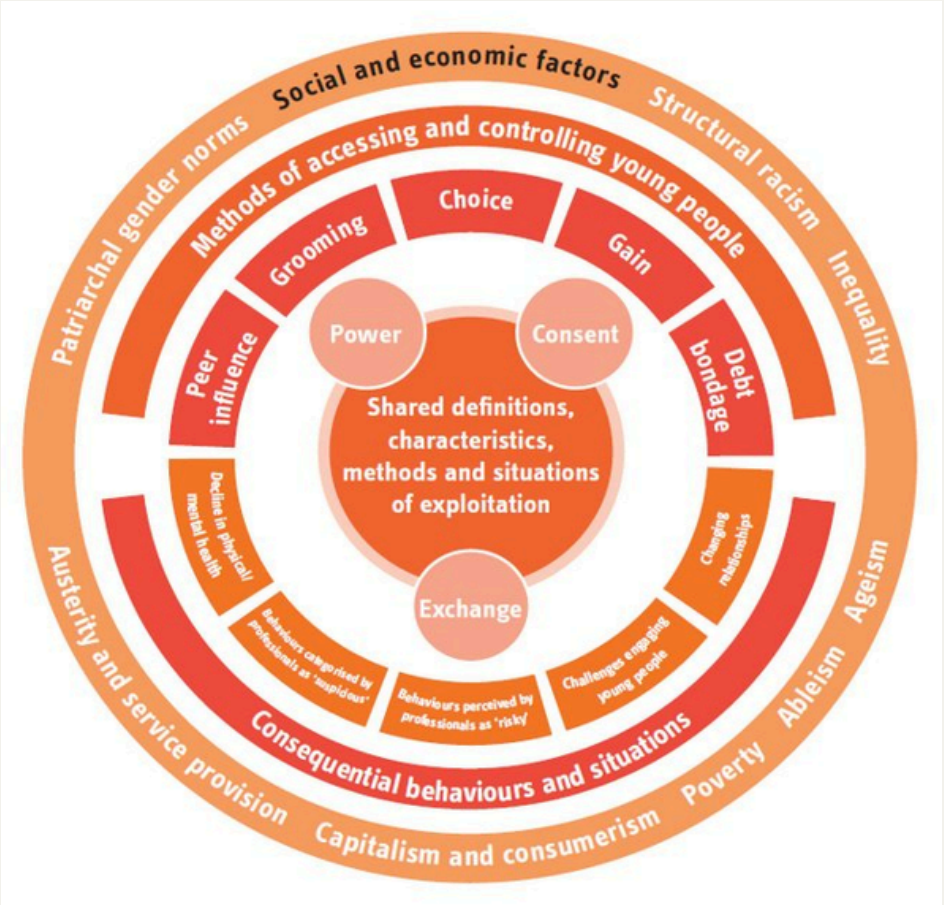

Figure One: 'Shared features of extra-familial harm' originally published in Safeguarding and exploitation - complex, contextual and holistic approaches by the Contextual Safeguarding research programme for Research in Practice

Consequent behaviours and situations

Extra-familial harm often has a shared set of consequences for young people. These are things that professionals and parents/carers see, rather than the experiences of harm that are hidden. This has historically meant that professionals have targeted these behaviours and have framed them as a problem, rather than seeing them as the consequence of harmful situations or experiences. These can include:

Decline in physical and mental health – In addition to sexual, physical harm and/or emotional harm, the pressures associated with extra-familial abuse can have a significant impact on a young person's physical and mental health. The protection response can also significantly contribute to a young person's declining physical and mental health, by adding additional pressure, isolating young people from family members and friends and disrupting their education.

Behaviours categorised by professionals as 'suspicious' - These types of harm can result in young people acquiring items or engaging in behaviour that professionals interpret as suspicious. For example, having new clothes, money or phones, or carrying weapons. These are often mis-recognised as indicators of 'anti-social behaviour' or 'criminality'.

Behaviours perceived by professionals as 'risky' - These types of harm can result in young people engaging in behaviour or making choices that professional perceive as 'risky'. For example, 'going missing' from home or care placements, using drugs and alcohol, or committing offences. These are often mis-recognised as indicators of 'anti-social behaviour' or 'criminality'.

Changes in young people's relationships/in engaging young people – Young people may appear to 'disengage' or become 'hostile' to caregivers and professionals or begin to truant from school or college. This is often approached as a behavioural issue rather than as a result of exploitation or system harm.

Social and economic factors

Poverty and inequality, racism, sexism, heteronormative gender norms, ageism, ableism, capitalism and consumerism and the impacts of austerity on service provision and community all impact young people's experiences of extra-familial harm and their experiences of protection. For example, evidence suggests that Black boys and young men are disproportionately vulnerable to child criminal exploitation (CCE) and that they are among the majority of those charged with modern slavery offences in relation to CCE.

It is also the case that certain 'types' of harm gain greater attention in the public sphere at specific times, often due to political, social and economic events. Often, this does not reflect the experiences of young people and can result in chaotic and overcrowded policy and practice landscapes that are confusing for professionals. We need a policy and practice response that can respond holistically to the shared features of extra-familial harm – which means a system that understands and cares for adolescents and that has the resource and skill to build safety around young people in their peer relationships, schools and communities. What we don't need is lots of new and separate policies and practices responding to an ever changing and growing list of harm types.

What does this mean for how services prevent and respond to these harms?

It is useful to think about the shared features and consequences of these harms as this can inform how we design child welfare systems that can respond holistically to adolescents' experiences of harm in their peer relationships, schools and public spaces, as well as informing how policy can shape the environments of young people's lives more broadly to mitigate some of the associated risks.

For example, if a young person is approached by an adult in the local community and coerced to transport drugs to pay off a 'debt' they have acquired through their cannabis use, it makes little sense to only educate that young person about the risks of drug use. The system needs to be able to respond to debt as a method for coercing young people. Similarly, if a young person is repeatedly 'going missing' from a care placement to spend time with people who are harming them, the child welfare system needs to be able to do more than impose curfews on that young person; it needs to be able to maximise safety in that young person's relationships. This all requires the system to be able to work with relationships and contexts beyond young people's families.

There are no easy answers to these problems, but it is clear that the traditional methods of assessing, supporting or monitoring families is not enough to build safety around young people. Thinking of extra-familial harm in this way can assist strategic and operational practices. Operationally, framing extra-familial harm in this way can help professionals identify features of the harm, or it's impact, that warrants attention, or they are finding difficult to address. Strategically, service and system leaders can reflect on which features of extra-familial harm they are well-placed to address, and those where their services may struggle. This could inform decisions that they make on service commissioning, partnership development and staff training among other matters.

Resources

You will find a selection of resources published by the Contextual Safeguarding research programme on our dedicated 'Extra-familial harm' webpage. These resources are free to read, download and use to support you to understand and respond to the types of harms young people experience beyond their families. These resources are the outcome of the many research projects the Contextual Safeguarding research team have carried out with children's social care services, schools, the voluntary and community sector, young people, their parents, families and communities.

This briefing is based on earlier work including:

Firmin, Wroe and Lloyd (2019). Safeguarding and exploitation - complex, contextual and holistic approaches. Darlington: Research in Practice.

Wroe, L. E., & Pearce, J. (2022). Young People Negotiating Intra and Extra - Familial Harm and Safety: Social and Holistic Approaches. In D. Holmes (Ed.), Safeguarding Young People: Risk, Rights, Resilience and Relationships. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Wroe, L., Lloyd, J., & Manister, M. (2023). From Peers and Parks to Patriarchy and Poverty: Inequalities in Young People's Experiences of Extra-Familial Harm and the Child Protection System. In C. Firmin & J. Lloyd (Eds.), Contextual Safeguarding: The Next Chapter (17-29). Policy Press.