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Believe in children Barnardo's

Relationship-based practice and Contextual Safeguarding

Key Messages for Practice

Rachael Owens, Gillian Ruch, Carlene Firmin, Hannah Millar, Ella Remes

November 2020

Contextual Safeguarding

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
RESEARCHING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, VIOLENCE AND TRAFFICKING

Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding young people from harm they experience in extra-familial contexts. As such it is compatible with, and supports the development of, a range of practice frameworks and models that are used to improve child protection practices and systems.

In this briefing we explore the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding and Relationship-based Practice within social care and related youth and community work. We consider the potential for bringing these two ideas together to create child protection practices that utilise relationships to build safety in extra-familial contexts.

The briefing is divided into three sections. In section one we summarise the two approaches. In the second section we reflect on current knowledge of the cross-overs between the two approaches and what we are yet to understand. In the final section we present a case study and make recommendations for how the two approaches can work together in the future.

Section 1: A summary of the two approaches

Relationship-based Practice

Relationship-based practice is not an entirely new approach, but a contemporary variation of the long-established psycho-social model (Hollis, 1964), which is interested in the psychological and sociological contexts of individuals' lives. The current configuration has adopted a more inclusive position, which combines its traditional theoretical origins in psychoanalysis with ideas rooted in systemic and attachment theory (Ruch, 2018). Contemporary relationship-based practice is an approach to practice, as opposed to a practice model, with several distinctive characteristics which:

- recognise that **early relationships and past experiences** affect current behaviours
- acknowledge the powerful influence on behaviours of **emotions, defences, anxiety and uncertainty**
- recognise human behaviour to be **complex and multifaceted, encompassing rational and affective, conscious and unconscious dimensions** that enrich, but simultaneously, complicate human relationships
- seek to make **relational dynamics** that are embedded in our personal and professional relationships both **visible and conscious**
- understand human behaviours and the professional relationship between practitioners and service users to be an **integral component of any intervention**
- see the internal and external worlds of individuals as inseparable, hence integrated **psycho-social responses** to social problems are crucial for effective social work practice
- acknowledge that every **social care practice encounter is unique**, requiring

attention to the specific circumstances of each individual
- require practitioners to have well honed **'use of self'** skills, in order for interventions to be channelled through collaborative relationships

The value base is characterised by a commitment to anti-oppressive, respectful and empowering relationships. Integral to a relationship-based approach are understandings of power in professional relationships alongside the importance of utilising service users' knowledge and expertise to facilitate partnership and collaboration.

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. The approach has been in development since 2011 following a three-year review of practice responses to cases of peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2017). The Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin et al., 2016), which provides a conceptual, strategic and operational framework for designing the approach in local areas, is made up of four 'domains'. A Contextual Safeguarding System:

- **Targets** the contexts (and social conditions) associated with abuse (Domain 1)
- **Uses a child protection** rather than community safety **legislative framework** to develop responses to extra-familial harm (Domain 2)
- **Features partnerships** between children's services and young people, parents, wider communities along with the range of agencies who have a reach into the places and spaces where extra-familial harm occurs (Domain 3)
- **Measures contextual impact** of its work – and the change it creates in public, education and peer settings, as well as for individual children and families (Domain 4)

Collectively, these four domains describe the capabilities of a safeguarding system designed to respond to the contextual dynamics of extra-familial harm.

There are a set of values that underpin the Contextual Framework – and understanding these is integral to ensuring its use stays true to the intention behind its design. The need to assert these values emerged through testing and were published in 2020 (Firmin, 2020; Firmin and Lloyd, 2020; Wroe, 2020). Contextual Safeguarding is:

- **Collaborative**: Is achieved through collaboration between professionals, children and young people, families and communities to inform decisions about safety.
- **Ecological**: Considers the links between the spaces where young people experience harm and how these are shaped by inequalities.
- **Rights-based**: Rooted in children's and human rights.
- **Strengths-based**: Builds on the strengths of individuals and communities to achieve change.
- **Evidence-informed**: Grounded in the reality of how life happens. Proposes solutions that are informed by the lived experiences of young people, families, communities and practitioners.

When applying this framework and set of values, practitioners have engaged in activities which: recognise the *interplay* between contexts; assess the *weight of influence* different

contexts have on young people's safety, and; seek to build contextual safety on two levels (Firmin, 2020). At Level 1 level practitioners and teams have identified ways to consider extra-familial contexts in their direct work with children and families – such as foregrounding the impact of these contexts during assessments, or recommending interventions in these contexts as part of the plan to safeguard and promote the welfare of a young person. At Level 2 systems have been created for referring, assessing and providing support into groups and contexts themselves as a means of building safety.

Section 2: The relationship between the two approaches

What they share in common

These two approaches share four common features. They both:

1. Safeguard young people by putting relationships, and the contexts in which these relationships occur, at the centre
2. Recognise the intervening power of relationships
3. Utilise and promote collaborative approaches to building and sustaining safety
4. Respond to behaviour, as well as verbal cues, as a form of communication

1) The centrality of relationships in context

In both approaches relationships are important, along with the context in which these relationships are negotiated, located and established.

When thinking about relationship-based approaches, practitioners are mindful of the immediate and wider social contexts in which young people and families are located (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). They also recognise the central importance of the relationship between a service user[1] and their worker, who is similarly located within a local and wider social context.

Practitioners pay attention to how the social context - poverty, unemployment, poor housing etc. – and the organisational context – most notably the bureaucratic demands of New Public Management systems and austerity (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016) impact on and constrain their interactions. The interconnections between these simultaneously discrete, yet inextricably interlinked, social systems is an important feature of the relationship, as indicated in Figure 1:

[1] In cases of extra-familial harm 'service users' are young people and their carers. To reflect this, the term 'young person' is used in the remainder of this briefing, whilst recognising that Relationship-based Practice extend to other areas of practice.

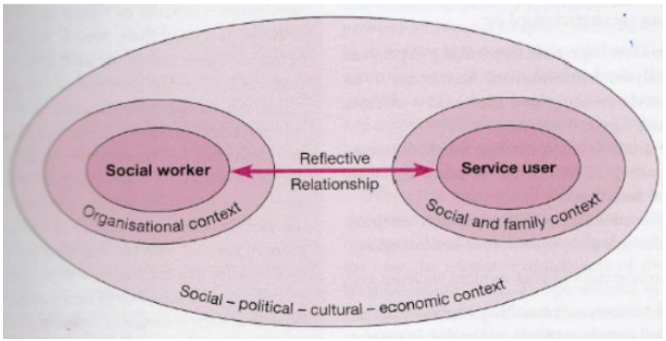

Figure 1: The context of relationship-based and reflective practice (Wilson *et al*. 2011, p.3)

In terms of Contextual Safeguarding, relationships emerge at three key levels. Firstly there are the relationships that young people form beyond the family home; those in which they experience protection and those in which they encounter harm (and sometimes these are the same relationships). In this regard peer relationships emerge as a central feature of the approach. Secondly, there are the family relationships which are often undermined, or put under strain, by extra-familial harm. Parents, and wider family members, can struggle to understand or engage with the dynamics of harm beyond their 'front doors', and can be left isolated. Social care systems have historically compounded this isolation by focusing the capacity of families to safeguard young people from extra-familial risks – rather than targeting the peer, school or community factors that are undermining relationships between young people and their parents/carers. Contextual Safeguarding invites practitioners to view family relationships through a lens of interplay: recognising the impact of external factors on familial relationships, in addition to the reach/influence of familial relationships on extra-familial harms. Finally, a wider network of community and professional relationships are built and sustained through a Contextual Safeguarding approach. The third domain of the Contextual Safeguarding Framework requires statutory agencies to forge relationships with people who manage, or have a reach into, extra-familial contexts: such as transport hub managers, shopping centre security staff, park wardens, refuse collectors, youth workers, educationalists, residents wardens and so on. Social workers, who often lead assessments in Contextual Safeguarding systems, are tasked with building relationships with this broad church of social actors as they design and implement plans for creating safety in extra-familial contexts.

Both Relationship-based practice and Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, requires practitioners to work with the contexts in which relationships form and use relationships to shift the contextual dynamics that may be undermining young people's safety. In this sense the way that relationships are used is informed by the contexts in which they exist and the relationships themselves become a source of contextual intervention.

2) Intervention 'through' relationships

Given the centrality of relationships to both of these practice frameworks, it will come as no surprise that both see relationships as a source of 'intervention' or a route to change.

The challenge that relationship-based practice presents is to understand that the relationship can be both *the means* through which practice is enacted and *the outcome* of practice, in and of itself. An example might be creating a trusting bond with a young person so that they agree to take up a programme or activity; and seeing that bond as

the basis for enhancing their emotional, psychological and relational well-being and safety – which can last after your contact is over. This dual role underlines how important it is for practitioners to understand what it is about relationships that makes them effective, and it is here that the significance of the therapeutic dimensions of professional relationships come into play. Relationship-based workers recognise and respect the importance of the following dimensions:

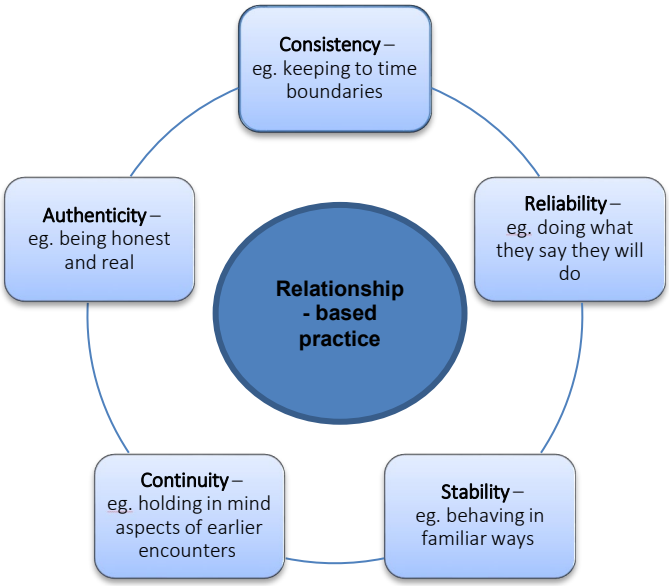

Figure 2: The features of relationship-based practice

Practising in this therapeutic manner creates secure attachments and establishes conditions that maximise the potential for change to occur. However, as most practice encounters take place in young people's own contexts – be it their homes, schools or communities, this can make maintaining a therapeutic stance challenging. Practitioners can become overwhelmed by the problems that they find, getting drawn in by the strength of feelings they encounter. These challenges are often intensified in cases of extra-familial harm, where existing systems are not always equipped to respond effectively. This can undermine a worker's therapeutic capabilities to offer containment as someone who understands but who is not directly affected by the same experiences. To maintain this, practitioners need to access their own relationship-based sources of support – namely reflective supervision – in order to make sense of the challenges they are encountering and consolidate their therapeutic skillset.

In Contextual Safeguarding, safety is often built in extra-familial contexts through the strengthening, or creation, of *protective* relationships. Often referred to as 'guardianship' this involves developing trusted relationships between young people and adults who have a caring investment in them and understand their safeguarding role (Figure 3). Practitioners' ability to form relationships with potential guardians, and broker plans that involve their contribution to safe spaces, is sometimes the start of growing these community relationships. Asking young people to identify people they trust i.e. a community youth worker, and then engaging with them in safeguarding plans, can be a way of building a stable, sustainable and young person-centred guardianship network. These relationships can also be sustained beyond the period of intervention, creating the potential for further partnership in future.

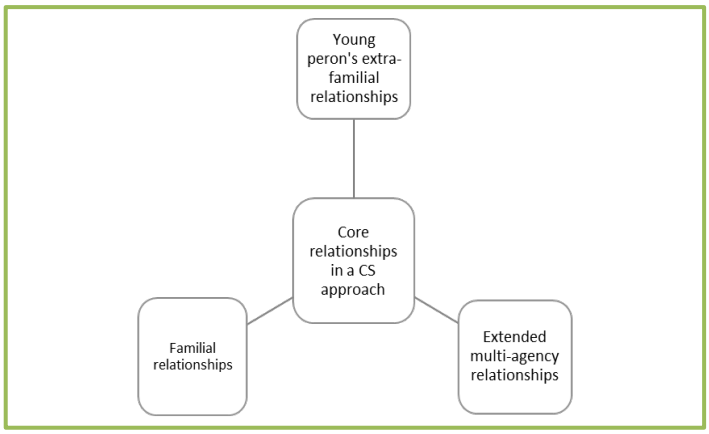

Figure 3: Relationships core to a Contextual Safeguarding (CS) approach

Practices such as mapping and walkabouts, which are used during Level 1 assessments (see Section 1) in a Contextual Safeguarding system, support practitioners to see the world through a young person's eyes. Seeing a community, street, school, or bus stop from a young person's perspective – and having that perspective shape the plan that is put in place – is achieved through, and builds, relationships between young people and professionals and leads to effective interventions within those contexts.

Both approaches therefore use protective and secure relationships to building safety that can be sustained. They do this by forming relationships in the physical contexts that matter to young people's safety. Wider structures – whether through professional supervision or community networks – hold these relationships and bolster practitioners.

3) Empathic collaboration

Underpinning both approaches is a commitment to empathic and collaborative relationships. This involves a willingness to suspend one's own viewpoint and to place at the centre the perspective of another in order to genuinely learn from them. For both Contextual Safeguarding and relationship-based practice this is applies throughout the system – from children, young people and families through to protective adults – both professional and community based.

Relationship-based practitioners work at building trusting, honest professional-young person relationships which enable a collaborative approach to bringing about changes for the better. This involves, first and foremost, seeking to understand where a young person is 'coming from', i.e. to a take up an empathic position in relation to their circumstances, which is also informed by knowledge and understanding of the various contexts adolescents occupy beyond their home. Practitioners working in this way pay close attention to their use of spoken and body language, ask open questions and communicate in ways that allow for reflective discussion. From such an empathic perspective, attention can be paid to the potential for unequal power dynamics within the professional/young person encounter. This can be mitigated through negotiating transparent, respectful agreements about the terms of engagement, boundaries and confidentiality etc. A further mitigating factor is that relationship-based practice draws on the psychoanalytic idea of the dynamic unconscious (Woodward, 2015). This concept brings with it an acceptance that everyone – young person or practitioner – experiences anxiety and has corresponding defences to cope. This acceptance of anxiety, how it manifests differently

in different contexts and the role played by defences, helps to break down any false idea of professional superiority and foregrounds the idea of working empathically and collaboratively, because neither one is the expert. Rather, each has their own unique contribution to bring to the relationship. In keeping with this spirit of equality, organisations committed to relationship-based approaches are also often characterised by collaborative and participative organisational development. Examples include young people taking part in the recruitment of staff or sitting on decision making steering groups. In this way, there is a direct link between the collaborative methods used within practice and way that practice is shaped and developed at a strategic level.

Collaborative practice runs though the four domains of Contextual Safeguarding (described above) – either implicitly or explicitly. It is implicit for example, in the first domain which requires practitioners to target the context of harm. Practitioners use creative ways to engage and work with young people – and/or those who know them well – to understand the nature of the harm in context, from the point of view of those most affected. Likewise, the third domain – which describes how a Contextual Safeguarding child protection system works with a range of partners beyond traditional safeguarding professionals – is explicitly based on the idea of collaborative working with those who have guardianship in the places where young people spend their time. Creating and sustaining relationships with business owners or park keepers (for example) to maximise their guardianship capacity draws on core relationship building practice skills, like establishing rapport, creating common ground, working with anxiety and resistance and empowering others. As with relationship-based practice, Contextual Safeguarding is committed to collaborative and participative research and practice methods, with the goal of advancing a safeguarding system that is informed by young people's interests and experiences in different contexts.

4) *Behaviour as communication*

Both Contextual Safeguarding and relationship-based practitioners are curious about the meanings behind behaviour, and in particular the role of trauma. Rather than, for example, responding to 'problematic' behaviour with a series of sanctions, or by explaining to a young person the possible consequences of their actions, both approaches take a non-judgemental and investigative – i.e. *curious* as opposed to forensic – approach to practice, in order to uncover what might not be initially apparent.

A relationship-based perspective recognises that the dilemmas and difficulties which people face invariably evoke anxiety and that practitioners play a role in naming and containing this anxiety. Taking an example of a young person throwing a chair at someone at school, a relationship-based practitioner would consider this an expression of an unmet emotional and relational need. They would sensitively work with the young person and their wider network to make sense of what might be being 'acted out' (i.e. communicated through their actions). Interventions that followed would then focus on enabling the young person (and potentially family members) to express and process their feelings in safer and more contained ways and through this find out what needs to change to prevent it happening again.

Equally, from a Contextual Safeguarding perspective, practitioners start from a strengths-based perspective of curiosity about why behaviour might be taking place in a particular context. They ask questions about how young people experience different contexts and

consider why their behaviour might be different in one compared to another. They understand that consent and choice is mitigated by a social context rather than fixed. In the above situation then, they would try to establish why the chair was thrown in this classroom (with these particular peers present) when the young person was calm, for example, within their youth group outside of school. This might enable a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the social context in which the chair was thrown. Interventions would focus on addressing the dynamics of the peer or school context that were associated with the young person's decision to throw the chair – for example; social norms in the school that normalised sexual harassment and undermined the young person's ability to seek help following a sexual assault at school.

What we are yet to understand

One of the risks of any model or approach is the potential for it to be used in isolation or to treat it as if it is the answer to all problems. We believe that social and psychological problems interplay with one another in complex ways and are best addressed in an integrative and holistic way. This requires a practice response that can address both the depth of psychological and emotional need and the breadth of social disadvantage and injustice. We see the opportunity for relationship-based approaches, combined with Contextual Safeguarding, to further realise the potential for this type of holistic, psycho-social practice. There are three currently underdeveloped areas which we believe the integrated approach being developed here could positively contribute to the development of safeguarding practice in response to extra-familial harm:

1) Avoiding 'either-or' and adopting 'both-and' integrated thinking

Relationship-based practice has sometimes been critiqued for being overly focussed on individuals, to the detriment of wider sociological explanations. A risk of only working with individuals is that it can inadvertently pathologise the person who has been harmed and imply they are responsible for their own harm. The risk of this is increased with adolescents who, due to their increased autonomy, are viewed as 'making risky choices'. Contextual Safeguarding actively shifts the focus away from responsibilising young people for their harm, by asking questions about the capacity of contexts (and adults within them) to create safety around young people and open-up safer choices. Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, can support a shift within relationship-based approaches towards a more contextual mind-set, which complements the systemic ideas that contemporary configurations of relationship-based practice have already embraced. The furthering of Contextual Safeguarding within organisations who practice relationship-based practice will help us to understand further the potential for this integration.

Likewise, if Contextual Safeguarding practice is followed in a way that fails to acknowledge complex psychological processes and the barriers that these present, it may come across as if it promises a straightforward, simple solution, which cannot fail if used 'correctly'. The risk with this is that the complexities – i.e. anxieties and defences discussed above – are underestimated and individuals/organisations lose heart and give up when promised solutions fail to deliver. A relationship-based practice framework therefore could help to locate practitioners and managers in a realistic frame of mind, by accepting the complex internal-external realities of trying to change social problems – which will often be frustrating, anxiety provoking and ongoing.

2) Effective and more fulfilling social care, community and youth work practice

Working within practice frameworks which rely solely on one-to-one relationships as the means of social change can lead to frustration and disillusionment – by young people and practitioners – if such change fails to materialise. Reynolds (2011) describes how the phenomenon of 'burnout' is the result of practitioners experiencing this over time, because they do not have the mechanisms or mandate to influence the wider social injustices as part of their day-to-day practice. One of the areas for future research and learning, therefore, is whether a practice framework which integrates both psychological and sociological perspectives on human and social problems – in which both relational and contextual factors are acknowledged – leads to more effective and consequently more fulfilling professional practice. Integrating Contextual Safeguarding and relationship-based approaches has, we believe, the potential for articulating and responding to both wider social injustices and working with emotional needs in an applied and practice-focussed way, which as well as being more effective could also reduce practitioner disillusionment.

3) ***The impact of the wider system***

A final unanswered question is about the specific social and organisational anxieties that are generated by the wider context in which contemporary safeguarding practice operates, and how these might challenge the possibility of practicing in the holistic way described in this briefing. We acknowledge that both Contextual Safeguarding and relationship-based approaches are challenged by the dominance of a procedural casework model to which the New Public Management agenda has given rise (Trevithick, 2014). Likewise, within the voluntary sector the managerialist commissioning agenda has created a competitive environment and survival anxiety, undermining organisations' ability to plan their core work over the long term and an insecure workforce (Cunningham, 2008). Our research to date (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016) suggests that these wider system issues are likely to generate anxiety and impact on an organisation's capacity to work in reflective and relationship-based ways. Questions then arise about how to sustain practitioners working within such a challenging context and also how to challenge this at a policy level with those who are in a position to influence it.

Section 3: How the two approaches could work together

There are many opportunities to draw these two approaches together to realise the aims that they share. We present below a case-study to demonstrate the possibilities:

Case study example

The scenario:

Asif was referred to a local VCS service due to concerns of drug dealing within his educational setting and for being arrested outside the city, where a knife was found in his possession. He had been missing several times and professionals were worried about his safety, the safety of others, and risks he faced of exploitation, serious youth violence and trafficking.

Asif lived at home with his mother and siblings. While his home was assessed as protective, Asif's mother was struggling to keep her son safe; often not knowing his whereabouts and feeling unable to keep him at home. Asif had also witnessed domestic abuse between his parents, and his father was currently in custody. Asif was very protective of his mother.

The response:

Relationship-based practice

On receiving a referral about Asif, before making contact, the VCS team considered Asif's inner-world. Being curious about Asif in this way from the offset gave space for Ali, his allocated worker, to build a meaningful relationship with him; rather than solely focussing on risk reduction and increased safety. Ali was interested in understanding Asif; what were his interests, drivers and ambitions? How were the current concerns impacting him and his well-being?

The intervention model was not time-limited and incorporated three main phases of support, with crisis intervention and relationship-based techniques embedded throughout:

1) Engagement and Assessment

Initial engagement with Asif presented challenges; he was fearful and resistant to engaging in support, and was 'pulled' by those exploiting him. Assertive outreach in the form of flexible appointments, persistency, paying him close attention and high levels of practical support all helped Asif and Ali connect. Asif enjoyed cycling, so this became their regular activity. Feeling relaxed, conversation was more natural and less probing/pressured – Asif would point out places where he spent time, share names of people he knew and vehicles he recognised. This opened up conversations about relationships and safety and began to form a picture of Asif's different contexts. Ali recorded these and when appropriate, shared them with the professional network to identify patterns or concerns that linked other young people, in order to disrupt criminal activity. Ali was transparent with Asif about what information was shared, why and with whom. Revisiting the confidentiality policy with Asif as disclosures were made and sensitively acknowledging that often young people share information in recognition that they know they are not safe, helped to protect the relationship at these difficult but key times.

2) Therapeutic Support

As Asif became more comfortable, he shared more about his life. In times of crisis he accessed the service with his friends and made contact with Ali during his missing periods. Meeting Asif alongside his friends was fundamental in helping Ali understanding Asif's 'position' within his peer group. With more insight into Asif's world, Ali could have more complex conversations about identity, status, community tensions and the role of 'elders' with him and his friends.

Traumatic and high-risk experiences had led to Asif displaying hyper-arousal, and a 'fight or flight' response. Activities were designed to acknowledge his urge for instant gratification but balanced with physical and emotional containment and regulation, for example rock climbing, go-karting and martial arts. Ali paid attention to Asif's sensory processing needs in order to support his emotional regulation and reduce episodes of dysregulation.

Addressing the concerns about Asif's knife carrying and anti-social behaviour Ali assessed that he had had little natural play growing up or any guidance around appropriate risk-taking behaviour. Ali suggested forest skills education to give him opportunity to explore risk-taking within safe boundaries. Asif enjoyed learning how to light fires safely and to use a knife as a tool rather than weapon, and this also opened conversations about how Asif was scared in his community and carrying a knife gave him a sense of safety and control. In response, Ali developed safety plans and worked with his mum around curfews and responding to Asif going missing.

Over time, Asif and Ali's relationship strengthened, due to its consistent, reliable and protective nature, leading to increased stability in Asif's world. Asif did not always agree with Ali when they debated issues, but he learned to 'to agree to disagree' and this modelled a new way of managing conflict, which contrasted to what he encountered in his community.

Ali worked with an awareness of attachment theory: seeking to repair the relationships when ruptures occurred. This modelled something very different from Asif's other experiences of being scared, controlled and intimidated by people within his community. Sometimes this required moving back to an assertive outreach-based approach of meeting Asif in his community and/or educational setting.

3) Moving On

Working with Asif's dreams and ambitions, with a focus on his future, was a key component to the work. His relationship with Ali supported Asif to engage in an initiative focused on spending time with other young people with similar aspirations and establishing his new vision and purpose. This was a hopeful and positive process and gradually reduced his exposure to risks within his community.

Reflective support and supervision

Building this relationships was challenging for both Asif and Ali. Ali wanted to offer Asif something tangibly different from previous offers of support and at times felt he was competing for Asif's attention with adults who were exploiting him and peers. In many ways, their relationship was the intervention. To support this, Ali received regular peer support from his colleagues and engaged with group and one-to-one reflective supervision in which difficulties with working with Asif were discussed openly. Within these forums Ali could express feelings of sadness for the work, frustrations with their feeling of incompetency and find creative ways to ensure the relationship was meaningful. Expressing and reflecting on these supported Ali to continue to work with Asif and reduced the possibility of secondary trauma and burn out. Ali's supervisor was empathetic and curious about what was going on for Asif and how this impacted on Ali, and in turn how this could help Ali understand Asif better. For example, when Ali experienced a loss of confidence about being able to work with Asif, they thought about how this might be a reflection of how Asif felt in terms of feeling undeserving of Ali's attention. These type of honest conversations about fears, barriers and triggers, alongside strengths and hopes enabled Ali to connect with Asif at a deeper level.

Having had space for emotional containment and reflection enabled Ali to engage with the wider professional network in a way that also reduced their anxieties. Ali's ability to contextualise Asif's behaviours led to less punitive and reactive responses. Rather than responding out of an impulse to reduce their anxiety about Asif, the network were enabled to think about Asif and his needs in a more responsive and holistic way. They could then focus on his immediate and longer term needs with both his physical and emotional safety at the core.

Contextual Safeguarding

All of Asif's contexts – familial and extra familial, internal and external, feature as important within this case study. We see Asif's own understandings of his peer group and community being carefully considered, engaged with and used to inform the assessment and intervention plan. Expanding a Contextual Safeguarding response in this situation could mean that, alongside working to improve Asif's safety, Asif's peer group or community could also become a focus of assessment and intervention in their own right, guided by the following processes:

- **Neighbourhood Assessment:** As well as informing the local network and police disruption, the information from Asif's cycling conversations could contribute to multi-agency discussions about whether harm to young people in the neighbourhood had met locally agreed thresholds of need, harm and intervention. This could lead to a parallel assessment and plan, focussed on engaging community partners in the locality, to increase safety and decrease the possibility of Asif, and other young people who spend time there, coming to harm.

- **Peer Interventions:** Asif felt safe enough to invite his friends to come into the service. This creates opportunities for professionals to consider whether, alongside working with Asif individually, a more formal peer group assessment and intervention is required, due to the strong influence that peers have during adolescence. Processes for doing this would mirror the individual work between Asif and Ali, by paying similar levels of attention to the group's functioning and safety needs, identify risks but also increasing guardianship capacity.

An integrated approach to practice

The case-study demonstrates how Contextual Safeguarding and relationship-based practice – united around a desire to enable protective, healthy, secure relationships – can work effectively together. We see how drawing on the key components of relationship-based practice (Section 1) can enable workers and wider professional networks to overcome the challenges associated with engaging young people affected by extra-familial harm, leading to meaningful relationship between them. This relationship provides a strong basis for offering young people emotional support and gaining deeper insight into their contexts of harm. We also see that when young people trust practitioners, workers are more likely to consider and address safety outside the home, because these are the contexts that have an influence over, and are often most important, to young people. Relationships then become the basis for reducing the likelihood that young people's vulnerabilities – like past trauma – can be exploited in those contexts. This is done through, for example, by bolstering safe and protective peer relationships, or building safety around a particular place, like a transport hub, so that a young person can safely travel to school, which then eases tensions in family relationships at home. Contextual Safeguarding offers a route into putting protections around relationships – in

the external 'world'– whilst relationship-based practice offers a route to create a space for emotional processing and healing – in the internal 'world'.

The case study also demonstrates two further key benefits of integrating the two approaches:

Increasing effectiveness for individual workers

Practitioners experience anxiety in dealing with the challenging and complex circumstances of children and families. Relationship-based practice emphasises professionals' need for emotional containment. This is not just to express work-related feelings but also because without being reflected on, professional anxiety can distort practitioner's communication with, and judgements about, the people they work with. By having access to their own professional 'secure base' – to use a concept from attachment theory – and the well-honed 'use of self'/self-awareness that such forums facilitate, practitioners are better able to offer a secure base to children, young people and families, from which secure and life changing attachments can grow.

Working with extra familial harm can be particularly anxiety provoking. Practitioners encounter harm such as rape, murder and the exploitation of children for sexual and/or financial gain. A relationship-based framework, which emphasises the importance of reflection and the acceptance of defences against anxiety, could support practitioners as they navigate these very distressing and potentially triggering scenarios. A relationship-based approach, applied in the course of Contextual Safeguarding practice with extra-familial harm, can support practitioners to work with and learn from their feelings, increasing effective practice.

Increasing effectiveness of organisational functioning

Relationship-based practice is also concerned with how psychological processes play out within groups and social systems, which, like individuals, might avoid anxiety by creating defences. This has been referred to in the literature as social systems as defences against anxiety (Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Lees et al., 2013). An example is the way that social work is heavily proceduralised with audits and performance indicators (Whittaker, 2011). This serves to keep anxiety at bay by minimising enabling helpful relationships (which bring with them pain and frustration and a sense of not always knowing how to help) replacing it with a feeling of control in the tick boxes.

Changing a child protection system so that it responds to extra-familial harm in a way that is consistent with Contextual Safeguarding is anxiety provoking. Alongside the nature of the harm discussed above, Contextual Safeguarding requires a realisation that current practice is inadequate and that things need to change. Contextual Safeguarding requires a new way of working, engaging in different sorts of relationships, which themselves may require containment and support; from a community member worried about knife crime on her estate, to a professional colleague who is only used to working one-to-one in scheduled office-based appointments. Regular, reflective supervision and managerial containment provides a way of responding to these challenges so that they can be thought about, rather than ignored. This could, for example, help organisations understand why they have become 'stuck' in their efforts to develop Contextual Safeguarding at a managerial level, even when practitioners are willing to work differently. A relationship-based practice framework, therefore, provides a way for organisations to reflect on, and

acknowledge, anxieties which minimises the risk of them being 'acted out' within their processes.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Contextual Safeguarding and relationships based-practice are two areas of social care practice which currently enjoy considerable attention and interest. We hope that this briefing support practitioners to realise an integrated approach to practice, in which both approaches can be used to the benefit of children and young people.

The Contextual Safeguarding Project at the University of Bedfordshire *Scale-Up* projects will continue to explore, via their nine local implementation test sites, the possibilities set out within this briefing. In addition, data from the *Securing Safety* Project will advance our understanding of the safety provided in relationships when relocating young people due to extra-familial harm.

We invite you to join this conversation. Please get in touch at carlene.firmin@beds.ac.uk if you have a practice example that you would like to share where a Contextual Safeguarding and Relationships-Based practice has been engaged to support a family or child.

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