



Durham
University

Global Centre for
Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding: value and principles in practice

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What we'll be looking at today

- An introduction to Contextual Safeguarding
- Why Contextual Safeguarding approaches are important
- How to take a Contextual Safeguarding approach – examples from practice

What is Contextual Safeguarding?

An approach to understanding and responding to young people's experiences of significant harm that happens beyond their family and home environments



Children and families were telling us context matters

'if you're rude to them then they'll beat you up and I've seen how they beat up people, how everyone's scared of them....I said no for something very little I've been beaten up and bottled and I realised if I did say no what would happen...I was pressurised and scared, I knew deep down I didn't want it cos I was still young but I didn't have a choice.'

(Sara's (age 13) Witness Testimony, Case File 4, Review 2011-2014)

'There are things going on in Sara's world that I do not have access to...she is being controlled by others more powerful than me'

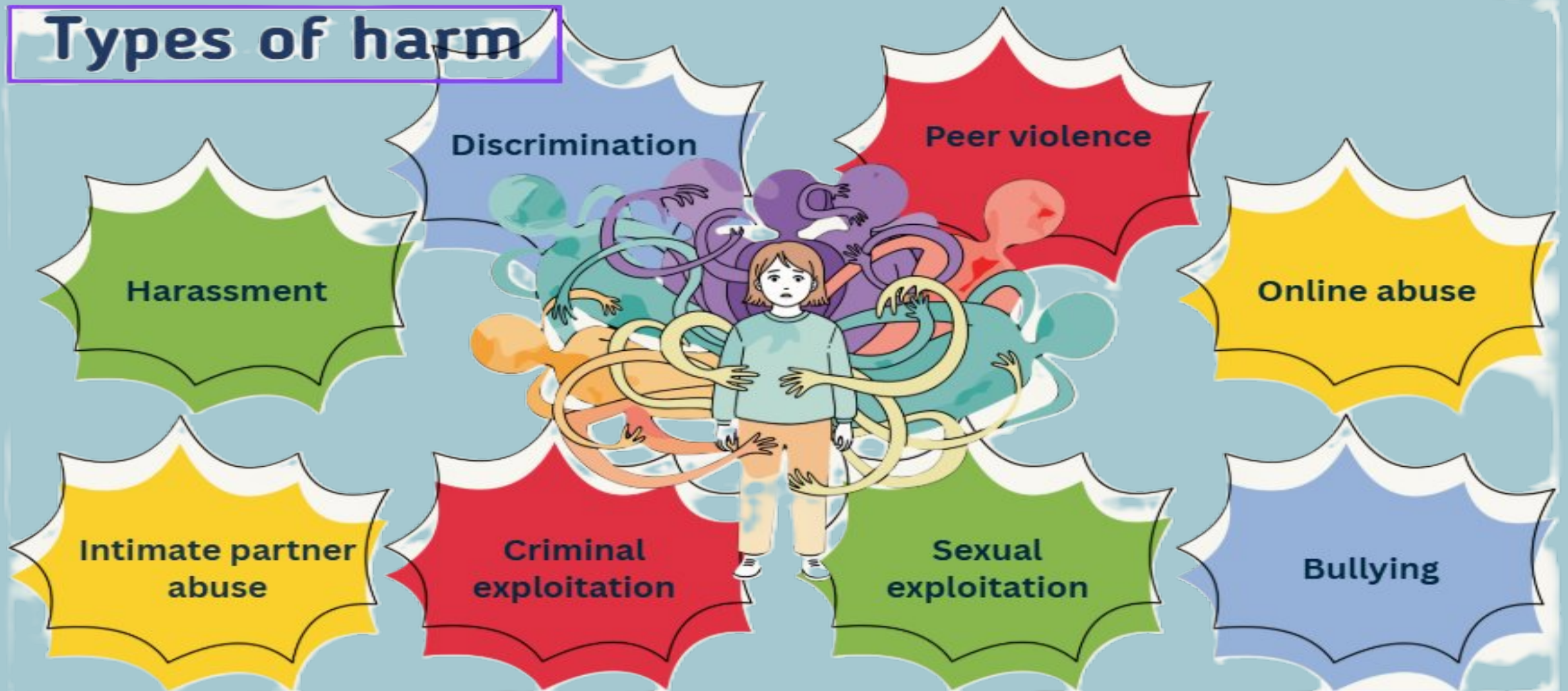
(Sara's mother's account in professional notes, Case File 4, Review 2011-2014)

Our system couldn't accommodate it

'Sara is 'difficult to engage with', 'anti-police' someone who places her friends and gang associates as a higher importance than her family''

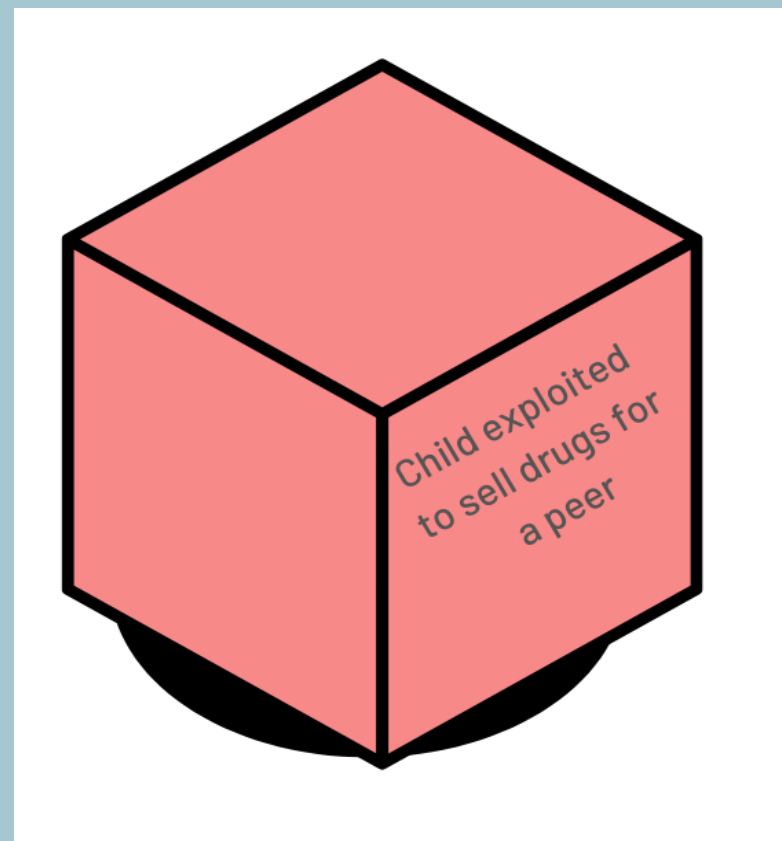
(Professional notes, Case File 4, Review 2011-2014)

Types of harm





'Today, I am sending an unequivocal message that professionals who fail to protect children will be held properly accountable and council bosses who preside over such catastrophic failure will not see rewards for that failure'
(Cameron, 2015)



It hasn't reached threshold...

Referral after Tom was arrested for possession with intent to supply of class A drugs (large quantity of heroin and crack cocaine)[. . .]

Tom's involvement with supply of illicit substances is currently considered to be the result of poor decision making, with no information to suggest he is currently affiliated to gangs. Whilst it is considered to have a huge implication for him given the risk of him being provided with a custodial sentence, such implications are not considered to present any safeguarding risks for Tom.

(Case closure, 15, male)

The Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin, 2016)



Domain one: Target

Seeks to prevent, identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse



Domain two: Legislative framework

Incorporates extra-familial contexts into child protection frameworks



Domain three: Partnerships

Develops partnerships with individuals/agencies responsible for extra-familial contexts



Domain four: Outcomes

Monitors outcomes of success in relation to contextual, as well as individual, success

Some efforts to reduce contextual risks have in the process displaced or excluded young people

Dispersal orders

Increased
monitoring by
people (police)
or CCTV

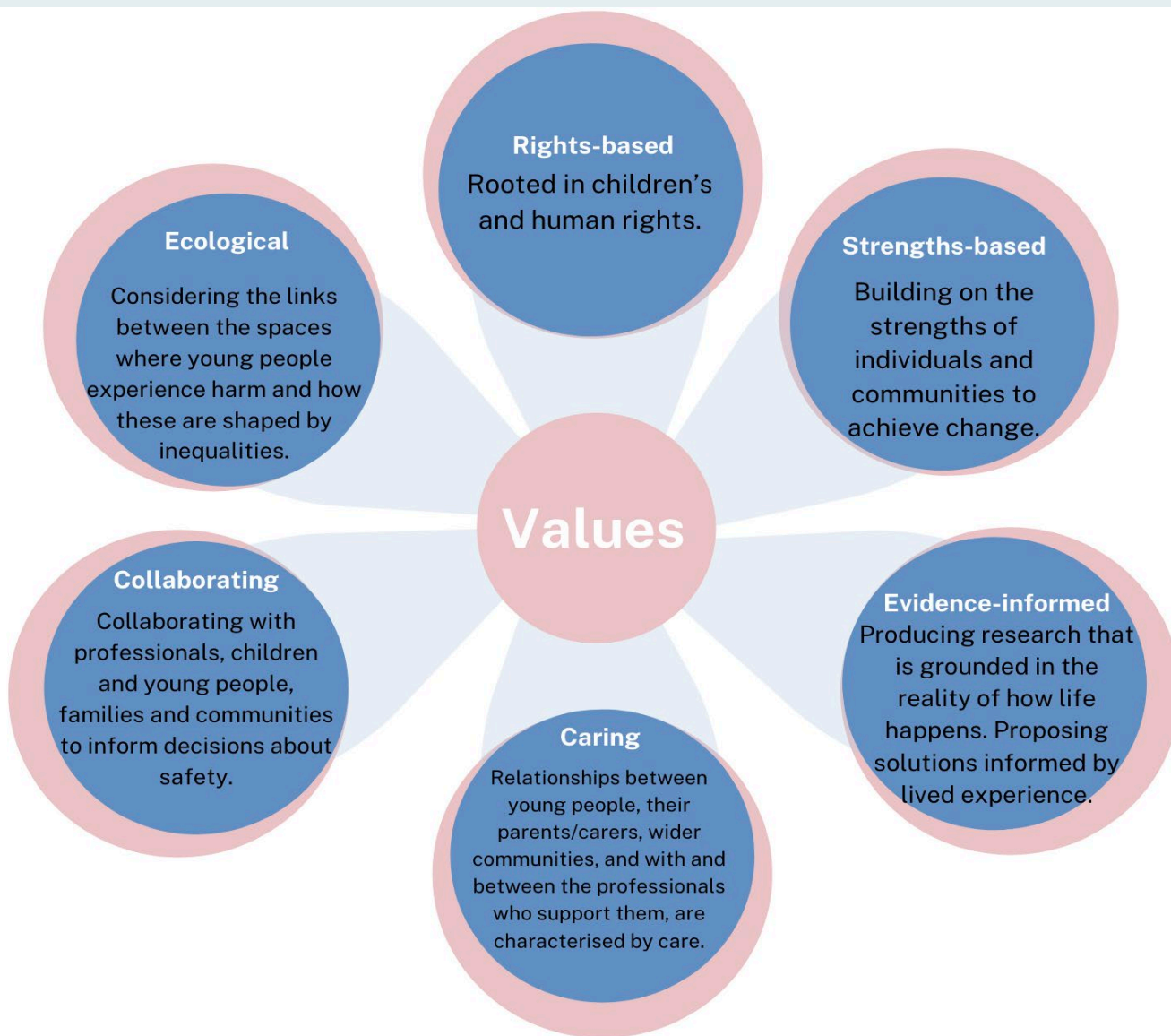
Mapping and
disruption of
friendship
groups

Exclusion from
schools

Design changes
(bus stop)

Unmet needs
(switching off
internet)

Extensive
information
sharing without
consent



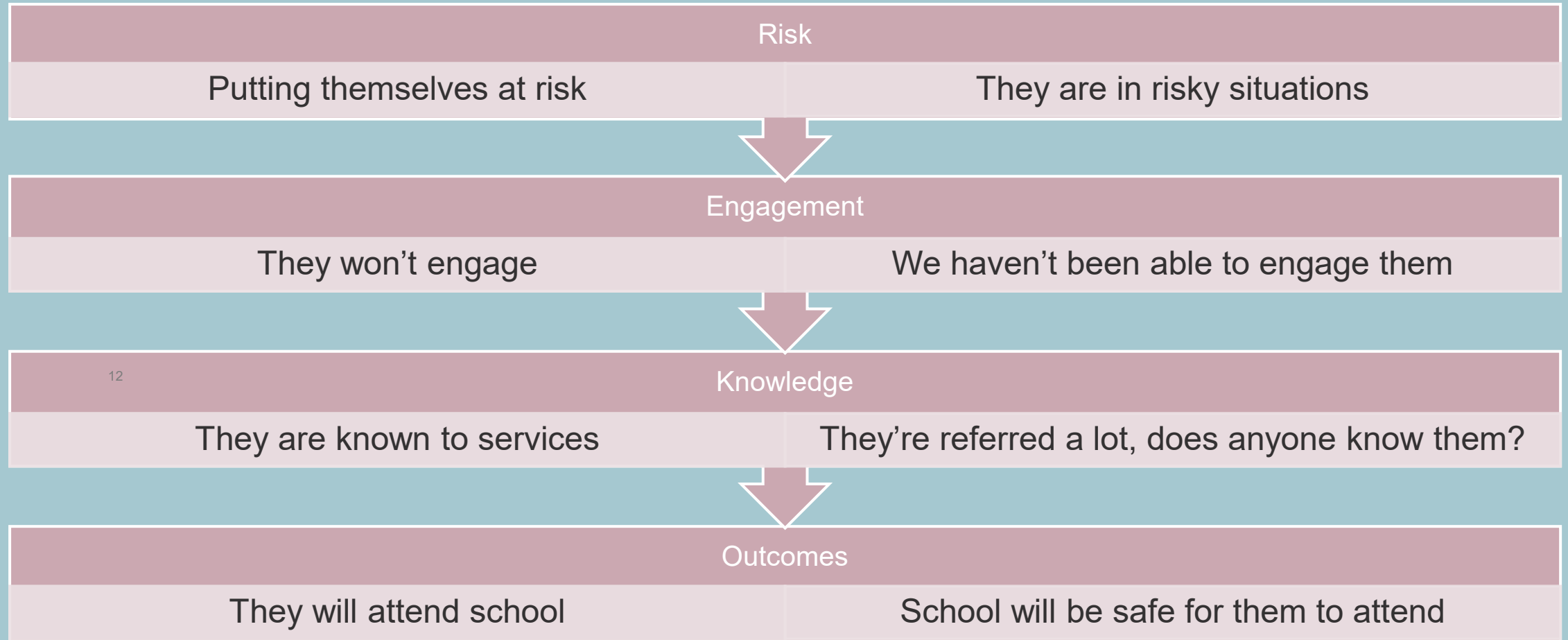
Contextual Safeguarding is underpinned by key values

Contextual Safeguarding principles are rooted in the value of care

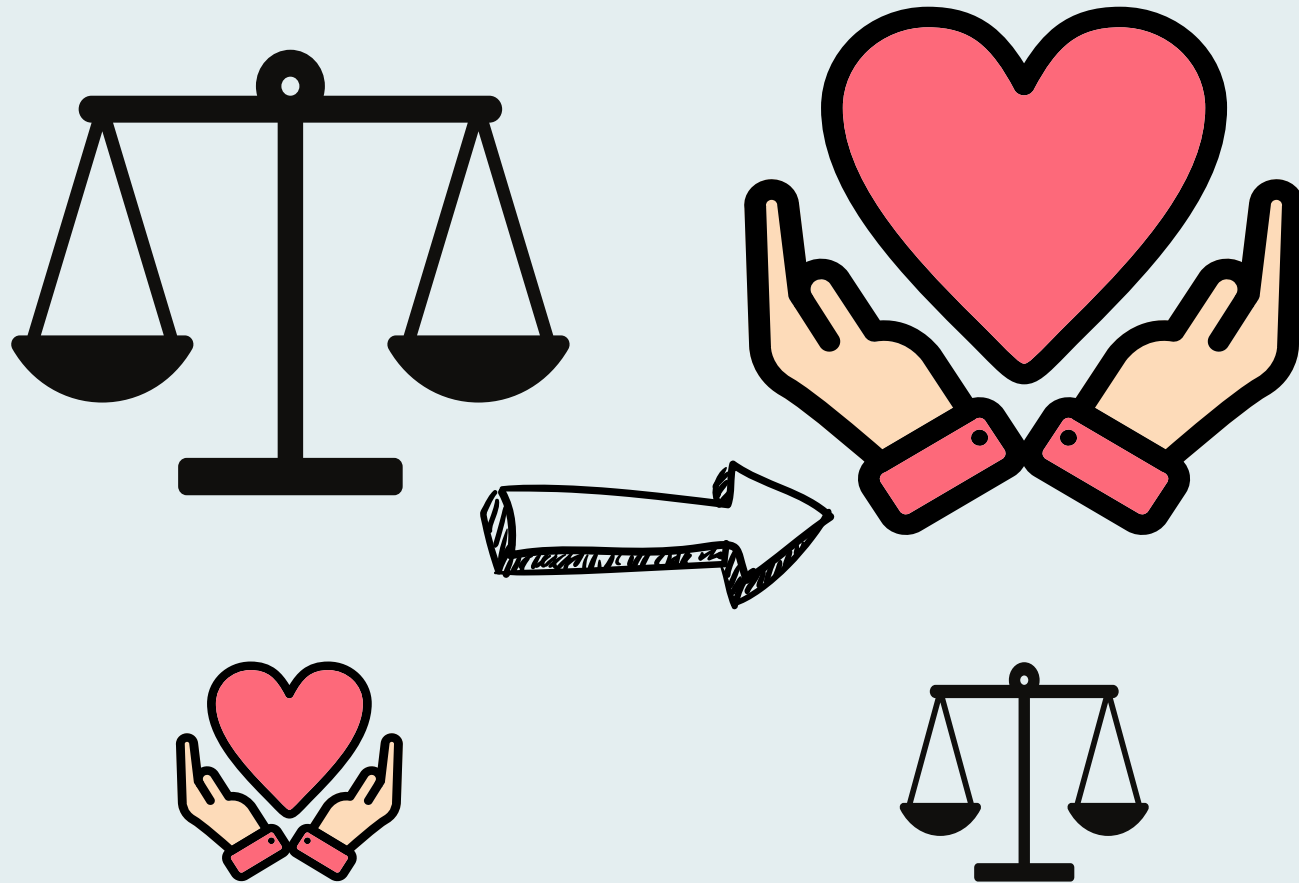
Relationships between young people, their parents/ carers, wider communities and with and between professionals who support them are characterised by care.



Language matters



Built on a foundation of care



"Sammy, you have witnessed a significant assault on your best friend, whereby he was stabbed last year. There's been ongoing concerns for your safety since this time both in school and outside of school in the community. It is clear that everybody around you is finding it increasingly difficult to keep you safe from the risk of serious youth violence... You were really open with me about how this is impacted on your mental health and how you were struggling to remain on track and not retaliate"
(Social work assessment)

Features of a caring response

Humility – recognising things have gone wrong and you might not have all the answers

Heartfelt – coming from a place of concern and care

Humanising – seeing a whole child, recognising their life beyond risk and harm and committing to meeting need

[They were saying] We want to make this work so you can have the best life. We're not here to take you away... not ... telling us how stupid she is or what horrible mistakes she's making. And it's all her fault, and she should know better. We haven't had any of that this time. It's been very understanding, very calm. (Parent)

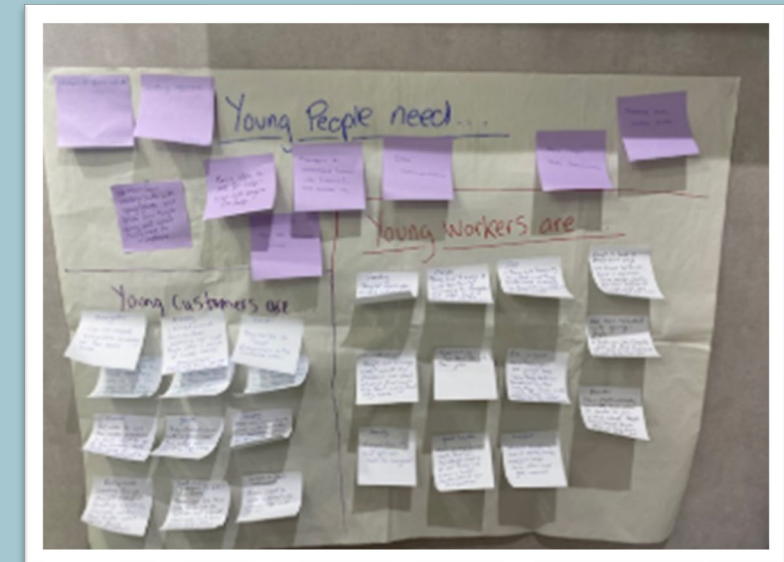
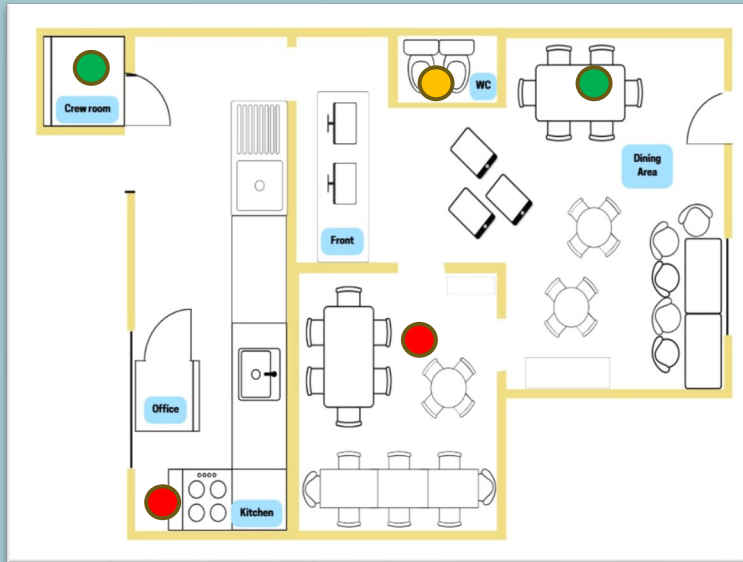
Involvement of traditional partners

Contextual Safeguarding in education settings

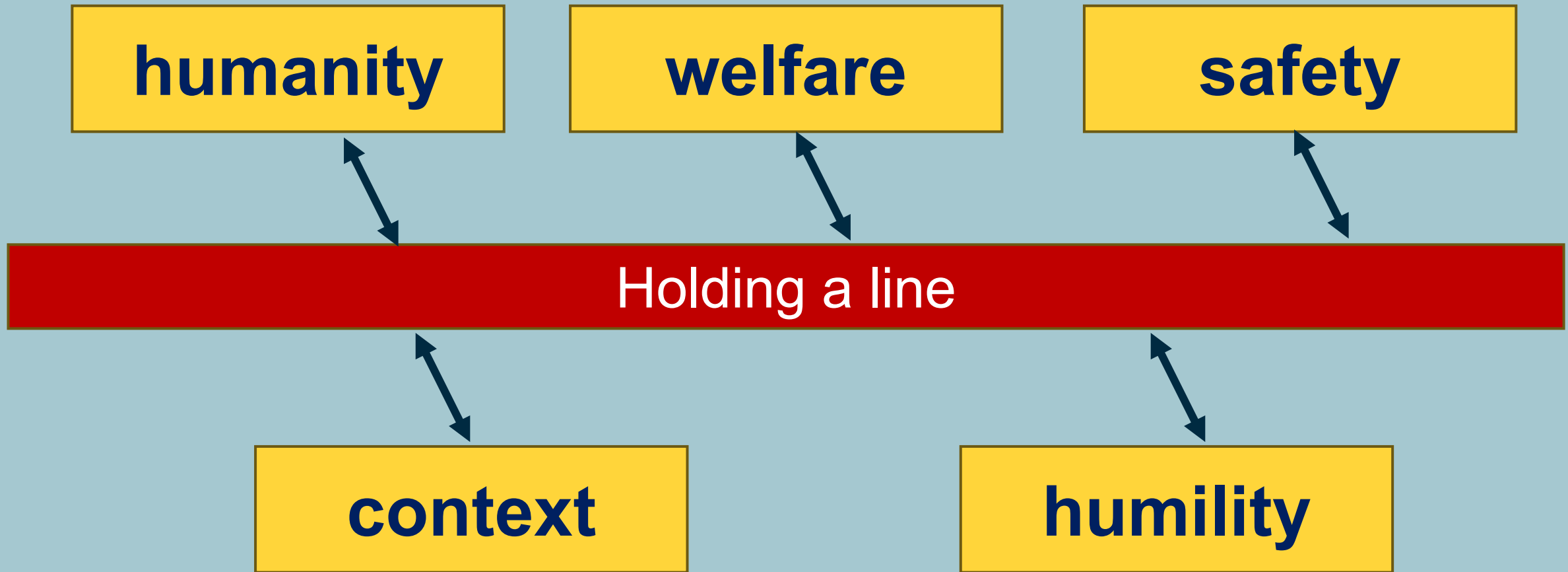


Involvement of non-traditional partners

Contextual Safeguarding in hospitality settings



Contextual Safeguarding: key takeaways



Holding a line on humanity

Who is this young person beyond the risks that the face?

Who loves and cares for them?

If the situation they were in were different how might we think of, or respond to, them?

What is developmentally expected adolescent behaviour?



*And the assessment helped us understand what that friendship group meant to each other. They all have shared lived experiences ...These are friends. These are people who see each other as family. Their core need is to be loved, to be needed, to be wanted, to belong (...) Peer mapping before that had been very much, let's share intelligence. And this was all about risk. But we started changing the conversation to what strength does this group bring to young people?
(Social worker)*

In systems that can dehumanise

Holding a line on welfare

What does this young person need from you?

Are those needs being met?

Are there needs being undermined in our pursuit of something else – is this proportionate and justified?

Is this in their best interest of ours?

Is their welfare our priority?

In systems that prioritise crime



*We have two main things to work on still - finding more ways to offer 'Laura' and her friends, fun, exciting opportunities to spend time together so they feel less need to go missing and getting the necessary school support in place so that Laura can feel safe and comfortable to be in school every day.
(Excerpt from ROTH Social Work Assessment, Document 3, Site 1).*

Holding a line on safety

Are we trying to build safety or just reduce risk?

Is this an example of safety or compliance?

Do we know where this child feels safe and do we know why?

Will our actions reduce safety as well as some forms of risk?

In systems fixated on risk



'There has been some progress made towards getting you back into a mainstream school and your mum and social worker are working hard to achieve this and ensure any school that is offered is in an area you do not feel unsafe going however, we have not achieved this yet and this would be a tangible outcome towards you feeling more confident about your safety' (ROTH conference).

Holding a line on context

Does a young person's behaviour change in different contexts – why would that be?

In what ways have our actions changed the context a young person is in?

What features of this context are protective, which are harmful, which have the potential to be both?

In systems designed to target individuals



...and we felt it was safe and appropriate to bring them together and just have those discussions, and it-it totally disrupted it. We were able to look at how they could safely spend time together, get parents onboard, exchanging numbers, that kind of thing, and it...and it absolutely did disrupt them feeling that they had to be secretive... They were able to be open and honest about who they're spending time with, and we could work with that safely.

So, I think that was probably one of the...one of the really positive... 'cause they were quite quickly escalating (Focus Group, Exploitation Team, Site 3)

Holding onto humility

Accepting you won't know the whole picture

Recognising we can make things worse

Seeking solutions outside of what we know
and trust

Questioning our own assumptions



It's pushed us massively outside of our comfort zone because I think your child protection stuff, you- you kind of had a really clear pathway, don't you? You don't deviate from that because it protects the children we think. It protects you as a worker, so it's really trying to come out of that comfort zone and think a little bit differently and it's left us feeling quite vulnerable at times. (Focus Group, Managers)

In systems that demand power

To conclude

1

How does your organisation frame state responsibility in respect of young people's safety?

Basic assumptions

- The state has a duty to protect young people from extra-familial harm
- The state has a duty to intervene beyond individuals
- Extra-familial harm is principally a child welfare issue



2

How does your organisation perceive young people and their social relationships?

Basic assumptions

- Young people are liked
- Young people are cared for
- Young people are more than the risks they face



3

Does your organisation look beyond individuals when describing extra-familial harm?

Basic assumptions

- Professional intervention can change contexts
- It is not possible to understand extra-familial harm without understanding the contexts where it takes place



4

Does your organisation's response to extra-familial harm show a belief that contextual change is possible?

Basic assumptions

- Extra-familial contexts can be safe for young people
- Safety can be built in contexts where young people have faced risks



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Why 'Common-Sense' is Complicated: Unearthing the Cultural Facilitators of Contextual Safeguarding Structures

Carlene Firmin¹, Delphine Peace¹ and Lauren Wroe¹

Abstract

• **Summary:** From being sexually/criminally exploited by adults in public spaces, to being sexually or physically harmed by peers in their schools, young people are significantly harmed beyond their families. Historically, many of these children have been criminalised rather than protected, and despite mounting concern from governments, and efforts at structural reform, many countries still struggle to offer welfare-orientated responses that effectively target the contexts where such harm occurs. In this paper we use cumulative evidence from four projects within a multiyear research programme to surface cultural factors that hinder or facilitate the development of welfare-orientated and contextual responses to extra-familial harm.

• **Findings:** We analyse nine published outputs from these four projects using a synthesis of Schein's theory of organisational culture and the 'cultural rules' of Contextual Safeguarding, developed through an application of Bourdieu's social theory. The results of our analysis locate cultural misalignment not solely within the social work and wider child welfare organisations that participated in the project, but in the underlying assumptions of the systems in which those organisations are based. Consequently, we illustrate why seemingly 'common-sense' responses to young people in need of protection are complicated to enact.

• **Application:** To resolve such complications, we argue that victim-offender binaries, individualised outcome measures, and the relationship between state and parental responsibility, require reconceptualization in the design of child protection systems

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For more information

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