

Working with vulnerable adolescents at risk of child exploitation: A rights- and relationship-based approach

Prof. Michelle Lefevre

M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk @MichelleLefevr1



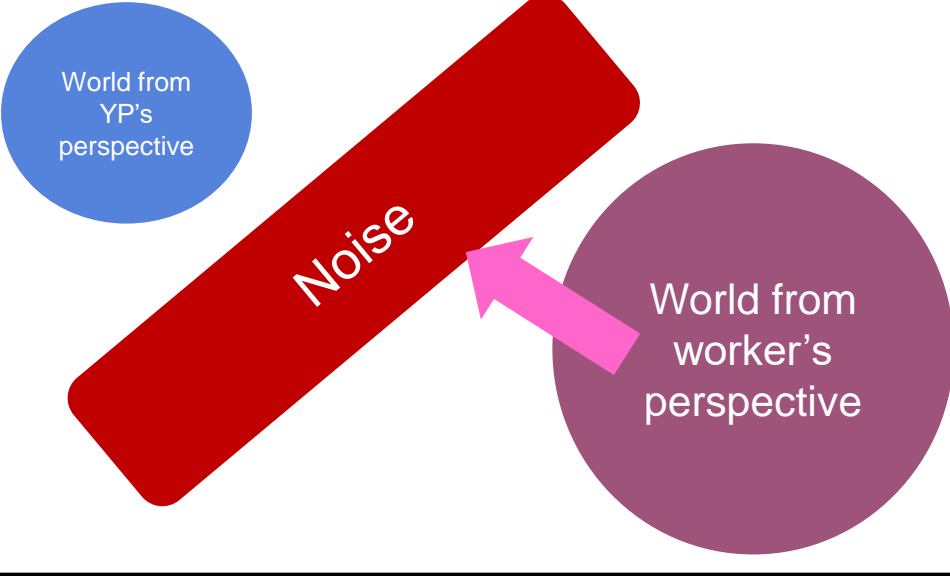
An emergent recognition of extra-familial risks in adolescence that most practitioners and practice systems weren't ready for



Who and what do you see?



How do we make sense of this? What affects our capacity to see the world as they see it?



The original problem: failing to see and hear young people

‘They didn’t even ask me if I was OK or if it’s OK to talk about it.’

“If only someone had listened”

‘They talked about me like I wasn’t even there. They were very harsh.’

‘They said we were putting ourselves at risk’

‘They made me feel like it was my fault.’

‘Why was I sent away from home and not him?’



(see Berelowitz et al., 2013)

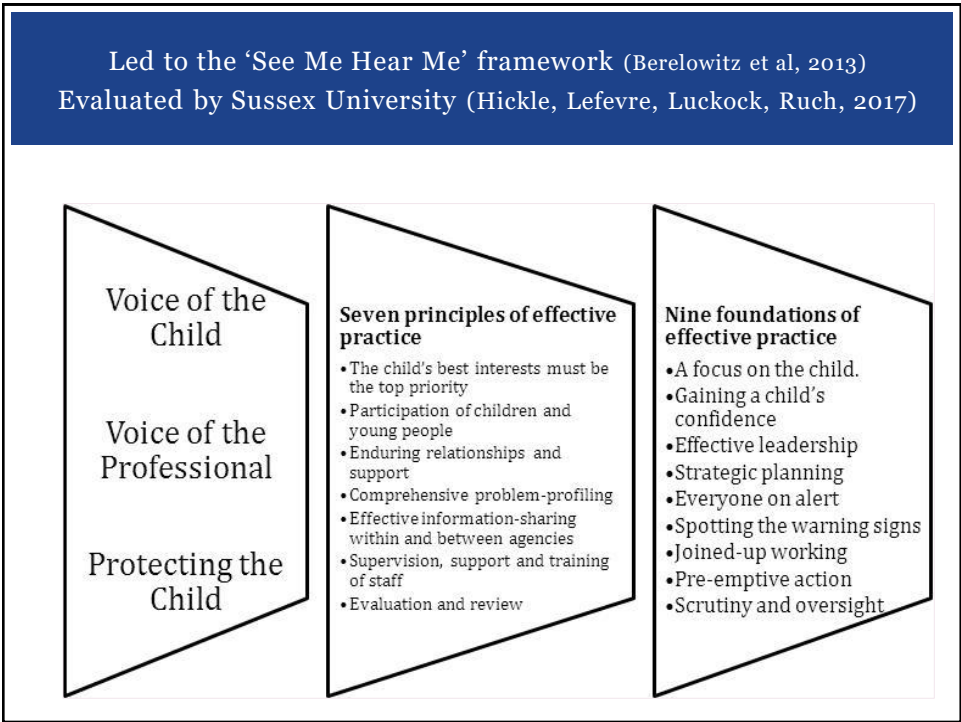
- Victimhood not seen
- Disclosures not believed
- Failure to protect
- Harmful sexual behaviours and drug involvement criminalised
- Failure to engage and support YP

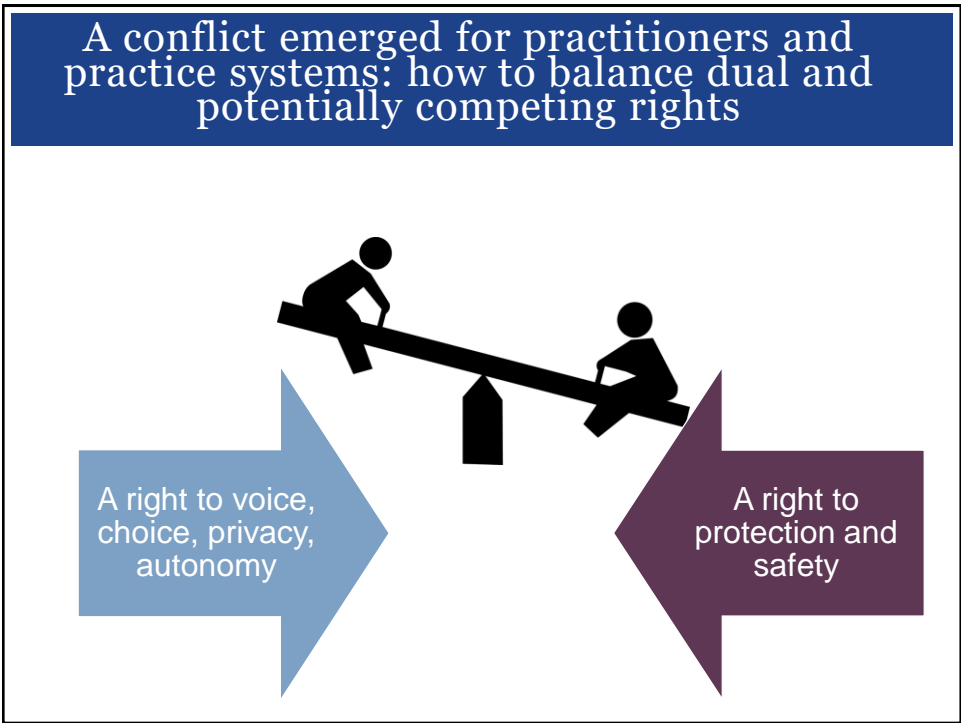
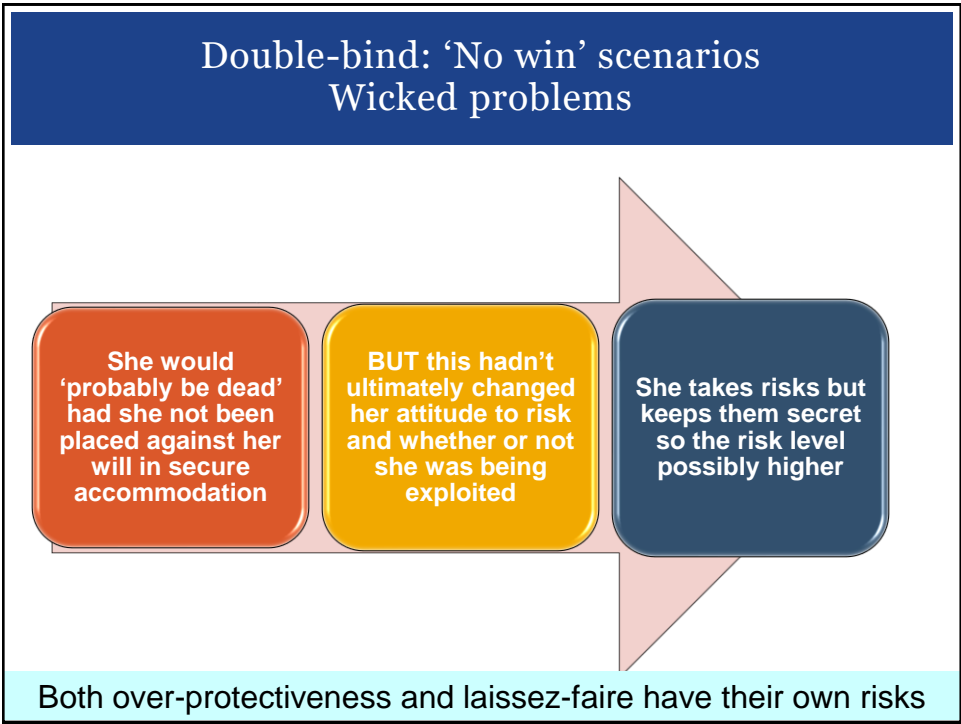
Key learning from Inquiry into CSE in groups and gangs

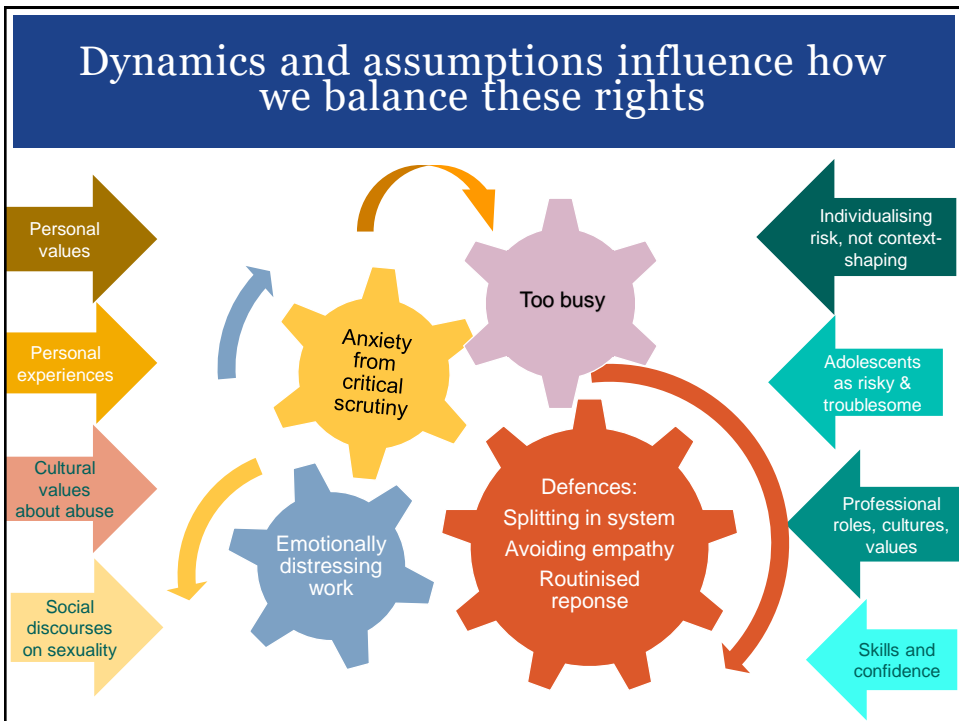
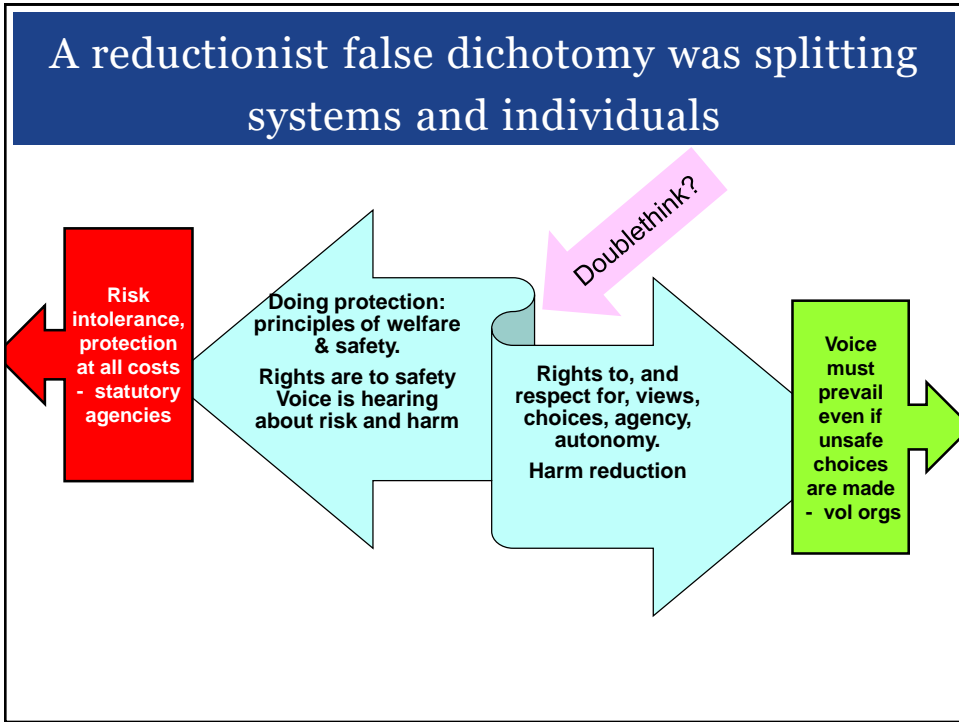
- *“Children and young people told us repeatedly that ‘being done to’ by the agencies charged with their care compounded their sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. They want to be partners in their protection and recovery plans and those that had this experience valued it immensely and felt stronger for being involved”.*

(Berelowitz et al., 2013, p. 56).









Some possible ways forward



Into the mind of the young person: recognising agency and 'choice'

Sexual and criminal exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual or criminal activity

- a) **in exchange** for something the victim needs or wants, and/or*
- b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity **appears consensual** (see Department for Education, 2017/18).*

- A constrained choice of their 'least worst option' (Hallett, 2017) among limited opportunities and support networks
 - Protection of gang, bed for the night, some money, pay for drugs, some affection
- Understanding their constrained and ambiguous agency - different to CSA's clear perpetrator, grooming and power differential
- Them choosing to leave situation is preferable

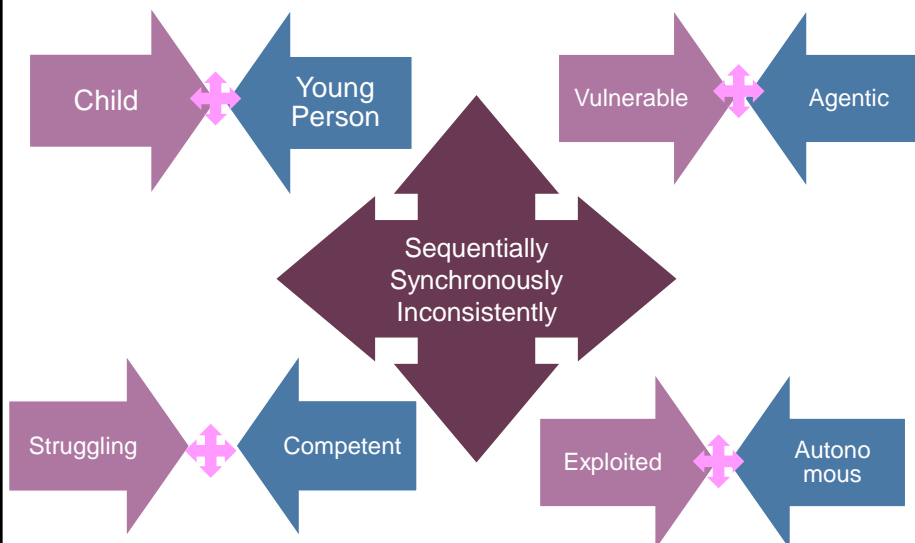
Sharing risk management with young people

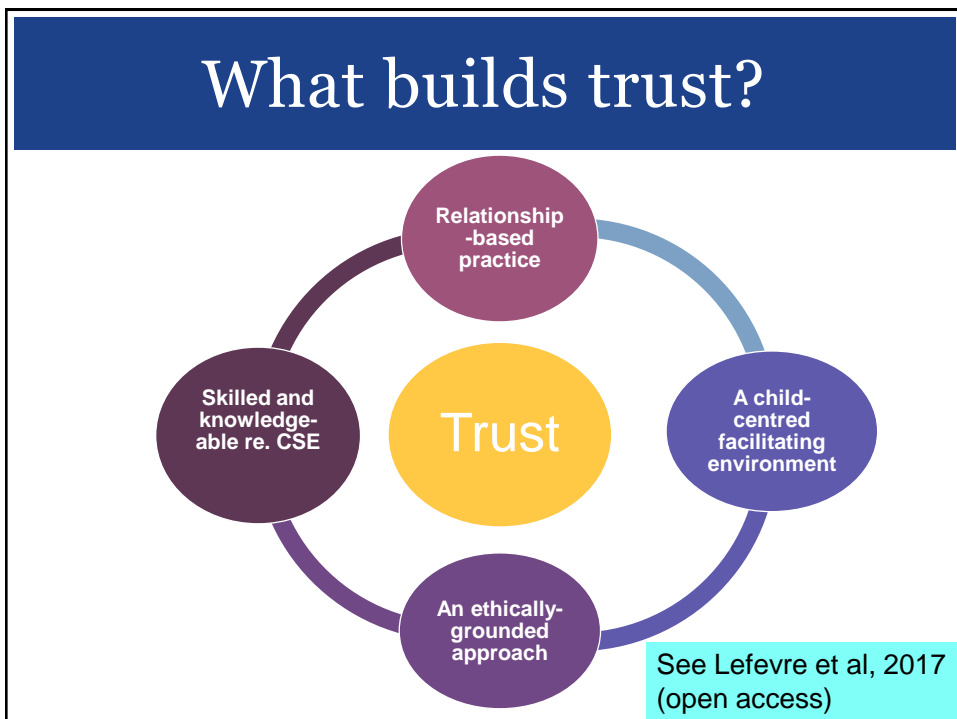
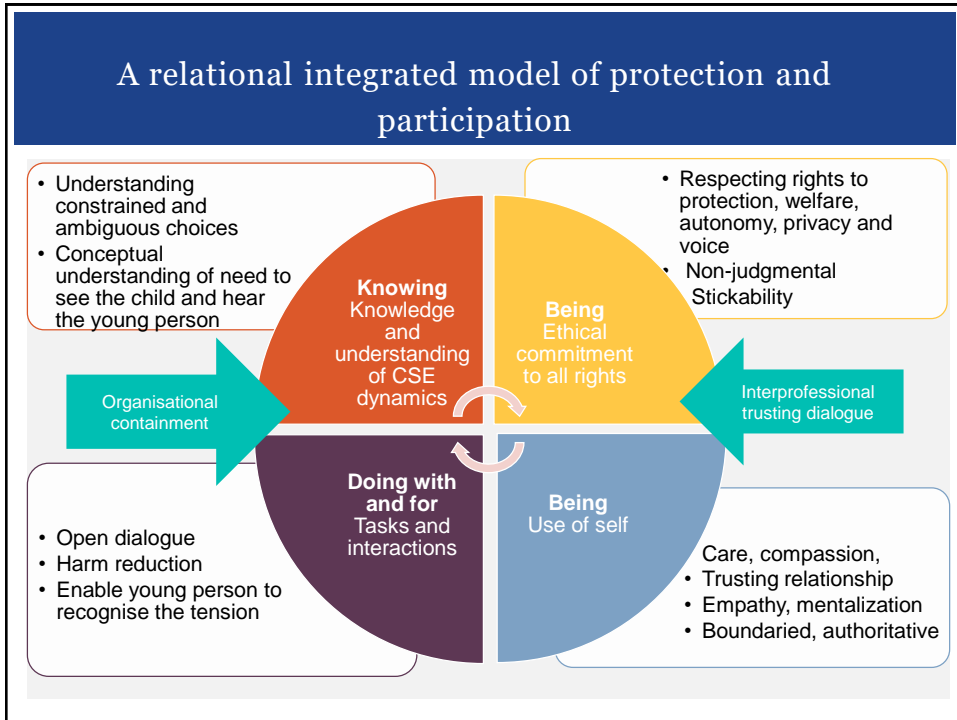
- Doing with, rather than just doing for

'... keeping stuff on the table of 'you don't have to talk about it, it's fine, but if you do want to talk about it we can do that whenever you want to' [Social Worker]

'... say to them 'I know you don't agree with this. I know you think this isn't happening to you and I need you to trust me that little bit and we've worked together a long time... what I need you to do is to trust at this time is that you're not making safe decisions' [2nd survey]

Ethical commitment to 'both/and' thinking: but how?





Concluding thoughts

- Importance of involving YP as partners in their own protection
- The micro-encounter as a key space for change (Larkin, 2018).
- Relationship based practice, rooted in ethical, child-centred approaches, is essential to engaging young people's trust and co-operation (Lefevre et al, 2017).
- The organisation and system must provide the containment, (Ruch, 2012) to enable this:
 - Reflective supervision
 - Manageable workload
 - Emotional space and validation
 - A safe space for mutual learning and challenge – surface disagreement
- Both/and is a threshold concept for this field – requires safe challenge of self and others (Lefevre et al, 2018).
- Think about assessing risks and strengths in peer groups and contexts/locations, not just individuals and families
<https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/toolkit>

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