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

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

- Violent extremism
- CSE
- Social media
- Sexting
- Serious youth violence
- Peer-on-peer abuse
- Bullying
- Harmful sexual behaviour
- CCE
- Gangs
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?

World from YP’s perspective

Noise

World from worker’s perspective
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 made me feel like it was my fault.’

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

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

(see Berelowitz et al., 2013)

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).
Led to the ‘See Me Hear Me’ framework (Berelowitz et al, 2013) Evaluated by Sussex University (Hickle, Lefevre, Luckock, Ruch, 2017)

Voice of the Child

Voice of the Professional

Protecting the Child

Seven principles of effective practice
- The child’s best interests must be the top priority
- Participation of children and young people
- Enduring relationships and support
- Comprehensive problem-profiling
- Effective information-sharing within and between agencies
- Supervision, support and training of staff
- Evaluation and review

Nine foundations of effective practice
- A focus on the child
- Gaining a child’s confidence
- Effective leadership
- Strategic planning
- Everyone on alert
- Spotting the warning signs
- Jointed-up working
- Pre-emptive action
- Scrutiny and oversight

A key finding from our evaluation
The professional response to earlier failures was largely protectionist

Training in risk recognition
Info-sharing
Move from ‘YP’ to Child

We transgress YP’s privacy, liberty, and autonomy.
Ends justify means.

YP feels disempowered, mistrusted and alienated.

YP disengages, rejects advice, becomes secretive or hostile, runs to exploiter.

YP physically safe but not relationally or psychologically safe (Shuker, 2013)

We get more worried, become more controlling …
Double-bind: ‘No win’ scenarios
Wicked problems

She would ‘probably be dead’ had she not been placed against her will in secure accommodation. BUT this hadn’t ultimately changed her attitude to risk and whether or not she was being exploited. She takes risks but keeps them secret so the risk level possibly higher.

Both over-protectiveness and laissez-faire have their own risks.

A conflict emerged for practitioners and practice systems: how to balance dual and potentially competing rights.

A right to voice, choice, privacy, autonomy

A right to protection and safety
A reductionist false dichotomy was splitting systems and individuals

Risk intolerance, protection at all costs - statutory agencies

Doing protection: principles of welfare & safety.
Rights are to safety
Voice is hearing about risk and harm

Rights to, and respect for, views, choices, agency, autonomy.
Harm reduction

Voice must prevail even if unsafe choices are made - vol orgs

Dynamics and assumptions influence how we balance these rights

Personal values
Personal experiences
Cultural values about abuse
Social discourses on sexuality

Anxiety from critical scrutiny
Emotionally distressing work

Too busy

Defences:
- Splitting in system
- Avoiding empathy
- Routinised response

Individualising risk, not context-shaping
Adolescents as risky & troublesome
Professional roles, cultures, values
Skills and confidence
Some possible ways forward

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

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

- Child
- Young Person
- Vulnerable
- Agentic
- Struggling
- Competent
- Exploited
- Autonomous

Sequentially
Synchronously
Inconsistently
A relational integrated model of protection and participation

Knowing
Knowledge and understanding of CSE dynamics

Being
Ethical commitment to all rights

Doing with and for
Tasks and interactions

Organisational
containment

Interprofessional
trusting dialogue

• Understanding constrained and ambiguous choices
• Conceptual understanding of need to see the child and hear the young person

Care, compassion,
• Trusting relationship
• Empathy, mentalization

Empathy, mentalization
• Boundaried, authoritative

Boundaried, authoritative
• Open dialogue
• Harm reduction
• Enable young person to recognise the tension

Use of self
• Respecting rights to protection, welfare, autonomy, privacy and voice
• Non-judgmental Stickability

Being
Use of self

Knowing
Ethical commitment to all rights

Knowing
Know, understanding of CSE dynamics

What builds trust?

Trust

Relationship
-based practice

An ethically-grounded approach

Skilled and knowledgeable re. CSE

A child-centred facilitating environment

See Lefevre et al, 2017 (open access)
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

References


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References


