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Relational epistemic safety: what young people facing harm in their communities want and need from professionals tasked with helping them

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ABSTRACT

When young people are harmed beyond their families, what kinds of professional relationships help to keep them safe? Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to creating safety in community and school contexts that asks how changes can be made in the environment to create safer contexts. However, (mis)interpretations of the approach have given rise to practice devoid of relationships with the young people affected by professional decisions, and which override their rights and ways of knowing. We draw on consultations with young people about what they need from professional relationships when they experience extra-familial harm – called the Young People’s Relationship Framework (YPRF). We then use this to analyse three pilot studies of multi-agency practice aimed at creating safety in extra-familial contexts. The findings show that, for a relational orientation to be achieved, professionals need to be guided by how young people know the world. We argue that this requires professionals to undergo a process of ‘undoing’: giving up privileged ways of knowing and making decisions, leading to what we have termed relational epistemic safety. We offer this to support professionals in developing relationships with young people who experience extra-familial harm that are characterised by equality and respect.

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Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is an emerging safeguarding approach to protecting young people from harm experienced in communities, school and with peers. It was developed in the UK in recognition that the existing child safeguarding system has failed to provide a welfare-oriented safeguarding response to harms such as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), Serious Youth Violence, ‘gangs’ and ‘county lines’. Contextual Safeguarding is a framework – rather than a model – with four features (or domains) that are required of child safeguarding systems (Firmin 2020). These domains require systems to assess, intervene, respond to and measure change within the

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context where young people have experienced harm and for this to be done with the purpose of promoting the welfare of young people, rather than their criminality (Wroe and Lloyd 2020). Fundamentally, this requires a shift away from the predominant individual case work approach to one which focusses on creating safety within community environments (Firmin 2018). The framework also requires the building of partnerships across agencies (including social work, youth work and education) to respond to harm in community or educational contexts, so that they are safer for the young people who spend time there.

Contextual Safeguarding has been taken up widely within UK policy and practice with over 70 local authorities committed to implementing the approach, giving rise to multiple practice interpretations. Reflecting this, the framework was updated in 2020 (Firmin) to include core values to support ethical interpretations of the domains. The values articulate the importance of working collaboratively with young people and situating their experiences as central. However, Contextual Safeguarding (albeit arguably partially applied) has continued to be utilised in ways that appear to be devoid of relationships with young people. Examples include responses reliant on quantitative data, analytics and surveillance to monitor young people thought to be at risk of harm (i.e Woodruff and Feek 2021). As Wroe and Lloyd (2020) highlight, responses to extra-familial harm (EFH) are in danger of becoming mechanisms for 'watching over' rather than 'working with' young people, if they are devoid of critical engagement with its value base. Without prioritising a participatory approach, practices to safeguarding young people from EFH are at risk of replicating and compounding their disempowerment and exploitation (Warrington and Brodie 2017).

In this paper we argue for the central place of collaborative and rights-based relationships between professionals and young people that are formed to create safety – both within extra-familial work generally and Contextual Safeguarding in particular. We argue that a shift in how young people are positioned within professional practice is required, which involves professionals relinquishing their power and foregrounding young people's way of knowing, priorities, views and experiences. This way of engagement we call relational epistemic safety. This concept emerged from the layered analysis conducted for this paper, which began with talking to young people about their views on Contextual Safeguarding and what they need from relationships with professionals when they experience EFH. Their answers formed the Young People's Relationship Framework (YPRF), that we then used to analyse examples of Contextual Safeguarding professional practice, looking at whether the things young people said they wanted from professionals were reflected in the data. We concluded that for the qualities in the YPRF to be realised, a fundamental shift is needed in how young people's lives and voices are centred in professional practice. This is needed at the micro level (between young person and practitioner) and at the meso level (professional organisational culture, systems and structures), because of how practice is intrinsically linked to the structures and systems in which it takes place. This paper is an invitation to those involved in developing Contextual Safeguarding practice to grapple with what it means to develop relational approaches that are truly guided by how young people know and experience the world.

Relationships in professional practice

This paper builds on the considerable work of scholars and practitioners of recent decades, who have brought relationship-based practice firmly into view (Ruch et al. 2018). The first principles of the International Association of Schools of Social Work describes how an empathetic relationship is a foundation of social work practice (IASSW 2018), whilst Social Work England expects practitioners to build relationships characterised by openness, honesty and respect alongside listening and empathy (Social Work England 2022). Likewise the National Youth Agency states that ‘successful youth work is built upon a trusted relationship that supports open communication and sharing of information’ (National Youth Work Agency 2021). Relationship-based practice is now widely championed as a humane approach which resists the bureaucratising effects of neo-liberal policies (Howe 1998; Ruch et al. 2018; Trevithick 2014). However, despite its ubiquity, the complexities of developing meaningful practice relationships in an ever-shifting context remain (Bryan, Hingley-Jones, and Ruch 2016 Nordesjö, Scaramuzzino, and Ulmestig 2022;).

When it comes to what matters in help-making relationships, research consistently shows that, rather than a particular technique or intervention, it is the quality of relationship between professional and services users that matters most (Barker and Thomson 2015). Helping relationships can promote growth, reduce emotional distress and catalyse positive change (Ferguson 2016). For this to happen, professionals must display a range of sophisticated qualities, including genuineness, respect, warmth, trust and humility (Scott, Arney, and Vimpani 2010). However, professionals carry varying degrees of power over the lives of those they seek to help, which can profoundly impact the nature of the relationships that can be formed (Waterhouse and Mcghee 2015). Involuntary involvement can rupture relationships (Maiter, Palmer, and Manji 2006), causing mistrust and relationship breakdown. Relationships can be undermined therefore, by a misalignment between the proprieties of services and those they are there to help (Davies et al. 2014) – as seen in the professional-centric term ‘hard to engage’.

Professional relationships in the context of extra-familial harm

Relationships formed to create safety between young people facing EFH and professionals can be subject to a number of competing contextual factors. Young people might disagree with their workers about the nature of the risk, whether protection is even needed at all (Pearce 2009) and what ‘safety’ looks like (Firmin and Owens 2022) – which can all undermine the possibility of building of relationships that feel empowering and trustworthy. Professionals might struggle to facilitate adolescents’ agency over their lives in the context of harm (Beckett and Lloyd 2022); and find themselves unclear about what ‘harm’ looks like when it occurs between children (Lloyd, Manister, and Wroe 2023) or who is responsible for it (Firmin et al. 2022b). These complexities impact how young people and professionals form safe-making relationships and a nuanced awareness of victimhood and choice, alongside understandings of structural inequalities is needed (Pearce 2009).

Despite growing concerns about the prevalence of EFH, there are no national data figures on the number of children experiencing this form of harm (Firmin et al. 2022b),

reflecting the emergent and uncertain policy and legislative framework governing EFH responses (Lloyd, Manister, and Wroe 2023). Consequently, young people experiencing EFH form relationships that, although they are all in some way intended to enhance safety, are nevertheless formed with adults from a range of different professional backgrounds, who have differing understandings of their role and work within different organisational contexts. A sexually exploited young person for example is more likely to receive a therapeutically orientated relationship-based response, than a young person facing CCE, who is more likely to receive a criminal justice response (Firmin et al. 2022). Whilst criminal justice relationships which use a social-ecological lens to take young people's life experiences into account can be helpful to them (Johns, Williams, and Haines 2016) there are considerable systemic challenges that can undermine trusting safe-making relationships in a criminal justice context, due the role that professionals have in deploying state sanctioned punishments towards young people (Phoenix 2016). Young people become highly sensitised to the quality of the respect and care shown to them by adults in this setting, and decide who could be potentially helpful to them, based on how they are treated (Phoenix and Kelly 2013).

Contextual safeguarding and relationships

This paints a complex picture of the how relationships that are intended to create safety, formed between young people facing EFH and professionals, are dependent on i) the qualities/capacities of individual workers, ii) their organisational and legislative settings and iii) how EFH is experienced and interpreted by both young people and professionals. Context – both professional and societal – therefore clearly matter when it comes to such relationships. On the one hand, professionals working in organisational contexts with little emotional support will struggle to offer emotionally containing relationships to the people they work with (Ruch 2011). On the other, even the best emotionally supportive relationships, if they ignore the context of people's lives – such as poverty and racism – can leave people feeling responsible for structural problems that are beyond their control (Featherstone and Gupta 2018).

Contextual Safeguarding draws on both understandings of context – the organisational context and the context of young people's lives – to create a framework for system change and practice development. Utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1986), professionals are asked to consider the interplay between eco-system levels – i.e. how harm within a peer group might be linked to the school culture in which the group is formed – as well as the features of the wider macro systems such as misogyny and racism, that structure young people's experiences. Bourdieu (1984) is also drawn on to probe how the social conditions within extra-familial contexts could be influencing and limiting young people's decisions and choices. Where the 'rules at play' within a context are harmful, practitioners are asked to focus on disrupting these, rather than on changing young people's thinking or behaviour. Contextual Safeguarding is not a model for practice however, it is a framework that sets out how a social care system can take in referrals, assess harm and respond to contexts where young people experience harm. It asks the system to consider not 'how does an individual child and family need to change to be safer', but rather 'how can we change this context to make it safer for the young people'.

The role of safe-making relationships within this framework is rooted in young people's rights and the prioritisation of their lived experience. Contextual Safeguarding and relationship-based practice are conceptually aligned (Owens et al. 2020) through, for example, a having a shared view on the importance of collaboration and – drawing on its theoretical base described above – a view of behaviour as inextricably rooted in context. Working this out in practice has been complicated however, with concerns that some have misunderstood the imperative to make contexts safer as meaning they should increase surveillance of young people, rather than investment in trusting relationships with them (Wroe and Lloyd 2020). A recent study showed that anxiety generated by an uncertain policy, legislative and practice framework, alongside very high-risk situations can lead to situations where knowledge or 'intelligence' about young people is prioritised above creating safety through building relationship with the young people affected (Lloyd et al. 2023). Another study showed how, during the relocation of young people due to EFH, practitioners struggled to maintain concurrent relationships with parents, young people and peers (Firmin and Owens 2022). We seek to build on this scholarship by focussing on relationships that take place in the in the context of EFH – with young people who are often absent, unheard, misunderstood or punished when they come into contact with services.

Materials and methods

Epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), provides the philosophical frame with which we address the question of how young people and professional safe-making relationships feature in Contextual Safeguarding practice. Hermeneutic injustice is described as 'when a gap in collective interpretive resource puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience' (p.1). We were drawn to this as a way of framing how relational work with young people has been deprioritised within some iterations of Contextual Safeguarding, as cited above, and because the prioritisation of adults views over those of children is particularly pertinent for child protection (Mitchell and Colville 2022). In the light of this, we approached this paper with the ethical and epistemic imperative to centre young people's experiences (Smithson, Lang, and Gray 2022). To do this we developed a framework for understanding professional relationships formed to create safety, based on consultation discussions with young people. We then used this framework to analyse three Contextual Safeguarding pilots undertaken as part of a research project to create systems change within local authority children's services. Finally, we draw together the learning from the findings to form a model for relational epistemic safety, which sets out how we could move towards a way of practicing in which young people's social experiences are more deeply and fully foregrounded in relationships with professionals when they experience EFH.

Pilots

Between September 2020 and November 2021, we ran pilots as part of a three-year project with nine local authorities to research and implement systems change based on the Contextual Safeguarding framework. The nine local authorities were based in England and Wales. The pilots were to advance the sites' readiness to incorporate Contextual Safeguarding through testing out a new element in the system, to inform longer term

Table 1. Description and short summary of the pilots selected for analysis.

Area Code	Pilot focus	Pilot Summary	Data collection
A – ‘The beach’	Location assessment	The pilot focussed on the seafront area where there were concerns about ‘anti-social behaviour’, substance misuse and violence between young people. Rather than dispersing young people elsewhere, the focus was to create safety in this space by involving youth workers; working with businesses local to the seafront; providing youth engagement activities; creating a social media campaign to signpost young people to support; and planning for continued safety.	Documentation Review ($n = 5$) Focus Groups ($n = 3$) Interviews ($n = 2$) Observations ($n = 3$)
B – ‘The school’	School assessment	This site created a pathway for school referrals, where a social care-led school assessment was trialled in an alternative provision school to see how this could apply to the wider system (i.e. how decision were made about when a school assessment was appropriate, which professionals would be involved, etc.)	Documentation Review ($n = 6$) Focus Groups ($n = 1$) Interviews ($n = 2$) Observations ($n = 1$)
C- ‘The street’	Neighbourhood assessment	This pilot involved a social work-led neighbourhood assessment of a specific street where there was concern about organised exploitation. The work drew on community guardians and multi-agency partnerships to harness a welfare-based response to creating safety in the area.	Documentation Review ($n = 11$) Focus Groups ($n = 4$) Interviews ($n = 4$) Observations ($n = 9$)

implementation. We used embedded research methods (Lloyd 2021) to work alongside practitioners: developing pilots, collecting data and providing feedback. Each sites ran two pilots. During cross-site analysis of the data three pilots stood out for their use of relationships-based practice and were selected for further analysis.

The pilots were led, or co-led, by social care, with core secondary partners in youth work and education. There was also involvement from police, health, housing and community safety as well as non-traditional partners such as residents and businesses. We used a mixed-method approach to data collection, as detailed in Table 1:

Pilots will be referred to according to the tags ‘the street’, ‘the beach’, or ‘the school’.

Consultations with young people

We collected data with professionals working in the pilots, to understand the opportunities and challenges of implementing Contextual Safeguarding. As part of the systems change process in the sites, the Contextual Safeguarding team were funded to consult with children on the ‘concept’ of Contextual Safeguarding to inform the system development in each site and to understand the implications of a Contextual Safeguarding approach for different groups of young people, in different settings. A mixed-methods approach to consultation was taken through the use of individual surveys, interviews and focus groups.

The paper draws on the data from the interviews ($n = 7$) and focus groups ($n = 9$) with young people across the 9 sites. In total we spoke to 66 young people in interviews and focus groups (see Millar, Walker and Whittington 2023 for more details).

Methods

The project involved young people aged between 12 and 21 years who were existing or potential users of safeguarding services in relation to experiences or risks of EFH. All

participants were engaged with through a gatekeeper. Gatekeepers were either voluntary or community organisations (n=7) or practitioners from Social Care (n=2) or Youth Offending Teams (n=2) who had an existing relationship with the young person. Gatekeepers identified young people, worked with the researchers to carry out assessments for each research participant to ensure they could safely engage with the research and provided support for the young people throughout the research process.

To consult with young people about a Contextual Safeguarding approach and the implications of this, a certain level of information needed to be provided about how the current system works to situate proposed changes. To do this, a series of scenario-based activities adapted from real-life cases of EFH were used as a discussion point during interviews and focus groups. Scenarios outlined a young person's situation, the EFH they experienced and the social care safeguarding response they received. The scenario chosen for discussion in each site was based on the Contextual Safeguarding response that was being piloted in their area. For example, if a site were interested in piloting an assessment of a location the scenario would be based around concerns of significant harm in a park. Young people would then be asked questions about the scenario. Questions asked were based on the following four themes:

1. A young person's safety and harm in each scenario
2. Trusted professionals and adults who could support the young person and create safety
3. The current child protection response received by the young person
4. Alternative ways of responding as per a Contextual Safeguarding response.

Whilst theme two focused specifically on trusted relationships with adults discussions on relationships emerged across all the themes. For example, when discussing alternative ways of responding young people would discuss adults, such as youth workers, who they would like to form part of the response.

Focus groups and interviews varied in length but lasted between 60–90 minutes and took place in person. Discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

This work builds on previous studies on what young people say they need from professional relationships (i.e. Hill 1999; Mcleod 2008; Ritchie and Ord 2017) by having a particular focus on relationships in the context of EFH. In consultations, young people drew on their experiences of EFH. They talked, for example, about how trusted relationships could only form if workers took into account their experiences of trauma, as explored further in the findings below.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Bedfordshire; with permission provided by appropriate Heads of Services across the sites, usually the Director of Children and Families. Consent for research activities, such as interviews and focus groups were obtained for individual participants. We also sought consent from parent/carers for children aged under 14, following a rights-based approach.

Analysis

In this paper we address the question ‘What is required for positive relationships that create safety between adults and young people in Contextual Safeguarding practice?’. We began by drawing on young people’s views from the consultations to develop a framework for analysing the three pilots. To do this, we analysed the data from the young people’s consultations thematically using Nvivo12, coding for features where young people implicitly and explicitly spoke about relationships. We then reviewed these findings to identify emergent patterns; that were then grouped and clearly defined.

The data fell across four overarching thematic areas:

1. Features: the features of a trusted relationship
2. Perspective: the positionality/perspective/approach of the person forming the relationship
3. Power: the nature of the relationship and the power within the relationship
4. Utility of offer: what the adult can offer as part of the relationship.

A number of subthemes fell under the four overarching themes. [Table 2](#) below outlines the overarching themes and subthemes which formed the basis of the Young People’s Relationship Framework (YPRF).

Next, we created a new Nvivo12 project and coded pilot data under nodes defined by the YPRF. Using a lens that came out of discussions with young people helped us to immerse

Table 2. Young People’s Relationship Framework.

Theme	Sub theme heading	Description and examples from the data
Features of a relationship	Consistency	Having the same person, over time, being consistent in the approach
	Listening	Listening to us and also hearing and responding to show you hear
	Non-judgemental and respect	Treating us as adults, not talking down to us
	Trust	The existence of trust even in light of the harm that has happened and what they have gone through
Perspective of the person forming the relationship	Diversity	Recognises we have different personality types and ways of engaging
	Stage of life	Allowing us to make mistakes etc. Know we’re kids
	Structural features	Understanding things in context and any discrimination we may have experienced
Power within the relationship	Connection	There needs to be some sort of relationship – familiarity, shared interested or being like one of us, not outsiders
	Equality	Being transparent about what is going on, what is being shared with who and when. Being thoughtful about where information is coming from and what information is being used to make decisions. Enabling young people’s participation in decision making and working in collaboration with young people as active participants with knowledge about their situation and safety.
Utility of Offer	Effectiveness	Doing things that are useful – what can you offer, how you can make change and can you effectively keep us safe?
	Positive and fun	Recreation, being friendly, being independent and having fun
	Role and mandate	Recognising the positionality of the professional and the impact of that on the relationship. Sometimes people are too close because of their role i.e. youth work or maybe we have bad history with professionals i.e. social work roles / police

ourselves in questions about the meaning of professional relationships. We then held reflective analytical discussions within the team about the themes emerging at the practice and at the wider system level. We discussed how we saw the YPRF being realised (or not) in the data, and what we saw in the data about what would be needed for it to be realised. This last question led to the headings presented in the sub-theme findings below.

Limitations

When this research project was being carried out, the Contextual Safeguarding framework had been implemented in one local authority. The nine sites where the consultations with young people took place were at the very early stages of testing Contextual Safeguarding and were scheduled so that young people's views would inform the system development in each site. For this reason, whilst the young people had experience of EFH, they had not experienced a Contextual Safeguarding system. Whilst this is a limitation, the young people involved did draw on their experiences of services to offer perspectives on what they need from a system and professionals aiming to create safety in relation to EFH and they were also asked to do this in the light of examples of Contextual Safeguarding practice (via animation videos based on case-examples) and asked to comment on these. We are also aware that, whilst the YPRF is based solely on young people's views, it is we, as adult researchers, steeped in our own assumptions and power structures, who have drawn it together as a framework and used it to analyse pilot data. Young people have not been involved in these secondary stages because it took place sometime after the consultation phase had ended and the limitation of access opportunities, once a research project has ended. Given how limited the data is currently on young people's experiences of EFH and their views on how service responses, we believe that this paper nevertheless represents an important contribution to questions about the place of relationships within Contextual Safeguarding. However, we hope that our work is built on in the future, whereby the ethical imperatives that lie at the heart of the model of epistemic relational safety that we put forward are realised more fully, via young people leading EFH services system change and research.

Results

In the findings below we present examples of the data used to create the YPRF, which is then used to illuminate the analysis of the pilot data. We found some alignment between what professionals offered in the pilots and what young people said they wanted from safe making relationships in relation to EFH. We present the data under three themes which emerged from the analysis of the pilots. These themes incorporate different aspects of the YPRF. These are: caring connections sensitive to context; collaborative working; and a recognition of the realities of young people's lives.

Caring social connections, sensitive to context

Under the theme of caring social connections sensitive to contexts, young people discussed different factors that they wanted from professional relationships. These factors are presented across different aspects of the YPRF (Table 2). Young people said that

when they experience EFH they need relationships that show that professionals care about them and could connect with them. The features of this type of relationship were young people feeling trusted, respected, and not being judged by adults. It also included adults listening and hearing them and being consistent in both the worker they see and the safeguarding response they get. For example, one young person discussed the importance of the consistency provided by their social worker in creating safety for them from EFH:

I've been at risk and ... it's very, very dangerous. My social worker she was my backbone, she was there at times where she should have just like ticked her box and left. So it's just about consistency, whether you believe and brother I believe I was at risk, she knew and she was there every day, whether it was removing me from the area and speaking to me at a bowling alley, or taking me to a coffee shop, or just chatting to me at home, or maybe I go and see her for a walk in the park

Young person, interview

Young people also discussed the importance of there being a social connection between young people and professionals. This social connection may be something that already exists, e.g. young people and professionals are from a shared area or background or have had shared experiences. The first extract shows how this connection can be related to age, and the second how it can be built between the young person and professional when they take time to get to know what they like:

Like the younger workers here, like even if they're not my worker, I find that even being around them, it's more of like an up vibe, because they're just like younger and they know what's going on

Young person, focus group

You can see it's very effective because when you find out what the young person is like, find out 'they actually like music', so you give them things to show them, 'this is how you can succeed in music', so you can help them

Young person, focus group

Within all three pilots we saw examples of social connections being formed between young people and the professionals tasked with creating safety for them. Key to this social connection was professionals having a caring orientation towards the young person which aligned, to some extent, with what young people said they wanted from professionals. Social connections in the pilots were rooted in shared experiences, knowledge or shared interests or through familiarity. For example, in the beach pilot, professionals built this social connection with young people through outreach work, as follows:

Going to those areas, building relationships with those young people, and completing outreach. And that's on a weekly basis ... that's not just once a month, that's a regular, it's an expectation now because it's been so positive, feedback has been brilliant, we have young people asking, 'When's this member of staff next coming on outreach?'

... It comes with that consistency. ... it's making sure they've got someone to talk to from their point of view. And that conversation may not happen for weeks ... eventually we will have those conversations

Practitioner, Site C, Focus Group

The social connection described by this professional was rooted in familiarity and was actively developed over time, through a consistent adult presence in a context where young people spent time. As familiarity grew, young people talked more and youth outreach workers listened to young people, in the places where they had chosen to be.

In the pilots we saw how some relationships were characterised by respect or commitment from professionals towards the young person/s, and how this was reciprocated with trust in the professional by the young person. In the school assessment, for example, the first extract shows how young people reported feeling respected by school staff, whilst in the second a lack of caring connection was a barrier to a young person trusting the professionals:

They [young people] felt the staff team knew them. One young person commented that in mainstream school she felt like a number

One young person reports school have not got to know him or understand his background

Social Care Lead Assessor, Site B, School Assessment

We see here how a lack of knowledge and understanding about a young person, either enabled or prevented a caring social connection to take place.

Collaboration

Under the theme of collaboration young people discussed wanting equality in relationships, particularly around decisions about safety. Here is an example of a young person discussing how involving young people in decisions creates protection:

Involving them in conversations and decisions that concern them ... you don't need to be in every single meeting, but maybe a debrief, this is what was said, this is what's happened, what do you think? Do you agree, disagree? ... You don't want decisions to be made for you, because then you won't make none for yourself You're still going to be vulnerable if you have somebody making all decisions

Young person, interview

Young people also talked about the need for workers to be thoughtful about where information is coming from and what information is used to make decisions; of the need to think about what is done with information shared by young people, and; a thoughtful approach to deciding what information professional actually need (rather than what they would like to know) to help keep young people safe. Young people talked about wanting adults to see them as credible, able and active participants in the relationship, who have knowledge, understanding and experience about their situation and safety, and where the power between them is levelled. In the following extract, for example, a young person discussed the importance of a young person and a professional working together to create safety:

Getting to that point of the relationship between social worker and young person where you can actually implement change, not only as a young person taking an initiative, but to help the social worker help them, it's actually working, it's coming into effect

Young person, interview

In the pilots, collaborative working emerged as the most challenging factor for professionals. In the street pilot, practitioners saw that there was a link between situations where professionals used problematic language about young people – like someone having a ‘track record’ or ‘not working with authorities’ – and their own lack of progress in safeguarding these young people. In the school pilot, a manager reflected on how, during a multi-agency meeting, information had been shared ‘inappropriately’ – hoping a new chair might change that dynamic. Another professional in the school’s pilot discussed the complexity of working collaboratively with young people when there are different perspectives:

Yes, so the implications are, I have three different stories. I have what the headteacher said, what the school said, and what the young person said, or young people.

Social Care Lead Assessor, Site B, Interview

In the context of school authority and hierarchy, even opening up the possibility that a young person would be ‘believed’ when their story contradicts that of an adult might be considered progressive. However, in the light of the YPRF, this comment highlights how far we are from a place where professionals can centre young people’s views and experiences in such a way that their wider experiences of being structurally silenced and ignored are considered.

There were some examples in the pilots of professionals trying to level the power between themselves and young people (or other groups on behalf of young people). This required them to relinquish assumptions based on surface information, in favour of seeking out and listening to alternative views – beyond that of other professionals – to foreground the perspectives of young people. In the street pilot, for example, street-based sex workers expressed an interest in playing a role in safeguarding young people. In response, professionals were keen that they were treated as:

Valued members of the community who have skills and knowledge that can play an integral role in safeguarding children

Multi-agency, Site A, Street Sex Worker Guardianship Proposal

Despite this less than orthodox approach, which shows a commitment to thoughtful engagement with alternative sources of knowledge when making safeguarding decisions and a sincere attempt to access young people’s perspectives, the professionals in this pilot were only edging towards the type of collaboration described in the YPRF. Ultimately, the predominant process was one of professionals making decisions without the involvement of young people.

Recognition

Under the theme of ‘recognition’ young people discussed different factors that they wanted from safe making relationships. These factors are presented across different aspects of the YPRF (Table 2). These included professionals holding accurate, nuanced and developmentally appropriate perspectives about young people, grounded in understandings of their lived experiences and realities, and being able to offer support in line

with these perspectives that they experience as helpful. One young person, for example, discussed the stage of life of adolescents and how this might impact their response:

You're a kid and you're just nosey ... how are we going to get parents to understand that this is not their child being an idiot or stupid, this is their child being young and not fully competent of what's happening

Young person, interview

Young people also talked about how having nice and enjoyable places to hangout should be part of professional planning when they seek to create relationships of safety. Describing where they currently spend time, one said:

There's rats and you hear them running about but you can't see them, and if you're sitting down just trying to chill out and you're hearing like – scuttering

Young person, focus group

In contrast they explained they would like:

If you added more stuff to make it a friendly, just like random, I don't know, like flipping ice cream van, like people selling lemonade, I don't know, stuff that is positive to make it more like, oh yeah, let's go there to get ice cream

Young person, focus group

In relation to 'recognition' young people also asked for professionals to engage with them in a way that shows that they see them as whole people, with complex lives, including their experiences of disadvantage and discrimination.

In the pilots, we did see examples of these wider factors being considered by professionals. In the street pilot, for example, professionals made decisions about safeguarding responses that also prioritised young people's need to have fun. They took time to understand what young people liked about the street:

Children and young people told us they liked the following about [location name]: Sport, everything, people are friendly, playing pool, it is diverse and multi-cultural, shops, swimming, good coffee, take away shops and family

Role, Site A, Location Assessment

Whilst it might be expected in universal outreach services to pay attention to young people's need for fun, this is much less so in safeguarding situations, where young people face high-risk harm in their communities. Therefore, findings suggest that this should be a core part of safe-making relationships represents an important re-positioning of young people's rights when it comes to safeguarding practices.

In the schools pilot, a youth manager commented on how school staff may not always be sensitive to the social and structural complexities that young people, experiencing EFH, often navigate:

We have spoken to young people ... outside of school, and some of them that we saw in school and then outside of school, [they] said very different things in different settings.

Youth Work Manager, Site B, Interview

Using the YPRF, we can view this data, not as a young people lying or contradicting themselves, but as an example of how the social conditions in different contexts can change how young people are able to engage with adults. This could lead a worker to reflect on the meaning of the different answers in different contexts, and what was enabled or inhibited within them.

Discussion

The findings show that Contextual Safeguarding practice can involve respectful and caring relationships between young people and the professionals tasked with helping them. However, we did not see young people's voices, perspectives and ways of seeing the world being centralised in these relationships. Using the YPRF as a lens to look at the professional practice, we were struck by the dominant adult-centric professional culture. Whilst The YPRF is by no means a perfect representation on what young people facing EFH need from professional relationships, it has helped to highlight the inequalities and power differences which lie at the heart of relationships between young people and adults, especially in situations of harm and abuse. Returning to the theoretical lens of epistemic injustice, we consider how adult knowledge is privileged because of adult power, and how this creates constrained and oppressive relational systems (Dotson 2014) for young people. The first step to situating young people's views and voices at the heart of professional safeguarding relationships is acknowledging the dominance of this culture. We call this process 'epistemic undoing' because involves first seeing, and then consciously giving up, the assumption of adult ways of knowing.

The YPRF disrupts the dominant adult-centric professional epistemic culture in what it values. Although the framework includes features that we might typically consider to be fundamental to good relationships, like care and listening, understanding and empathy, it also includes action and utility. The YPRF shows us that it matters what professionals do with what young people tell them, how they value what they are told, how well they can see the world from the young person/s' point of view and then what happens as a result. This is not only about interpersonal skills but about how adults share the power they have – to change the things that young people need changing (or keeping things the same if that is what is needed) including having fun and messing about.

Using the YPRF to analyse professional practice expanded and deepened our understanding of what we mean by 'context'.

Context

The three pilots in this study were each grappling in different ways with creating safety within a particular geographical context – a school, a beach and a neighbourhood. In each case the work involved making changes in the immediate environment to make them safer for young people. The findings show the importance not only of what is done, but also of *how* it is done. In the beach pilot, for example, we saw how creating connections with young people and showing them care meant that new relationships with professionals were formed and this became part of the social conditions of the contexts

that were being changed. Good relationships between professionals and young people facilitated other changes, because they were done *with* them, rather than *to* them, whilst their rights to choose where they wanted to spend time together was protected.

When we talk about the 'context' of EFH, the findings suggest that we should also include the culture of the professional-adult relationships that young people come into contact with. What kinds of relationships do these adults offer? Is there a dominant culture of seeing young people as full citizens? Are they given the benefit of the doubt, shown kindness and humanity? Is their love of being with their friends and having space to mess about taken seriously? A context where these things are absent should be seen as part of the social conditions that impacts the safety of young people – i.e. a professional culture that is not aligned with the YPRF can undermine safe-making relationships that are formed within that context. In the street pilot, for example, professionals reflected on how 'backstage' conversations about young people between professionals that had a negative and derogatory tone were linked to less successful safety outcomes for the young people involved. We see how isomorphic links across systems, where what you talk about in a meeting, how you treat your staff and the allocation of budgets, all have a bearing on the sorts of relationships it is possible to develop with young people.

Relational epistemic safety

For professionals and systems to align with the YPRF, they will need to relinquish using their power in a way that foregrounds and prioritises their own way of knowing (Smithson, Lang, and Gray 2022). Placing young people's ways of knowing at the centre is a process that we have called epistemic undoing. This is about a destabilisation of the status quo whereby professionals at all levels of the system engage in reflective critique about how they view, engage, listen, talk about and respond to the young people whom they are tasked with safeguarding. At the management level it includes thinking about how these can be facilitated, modelled and resourced culturally and systemically. This is less about skills and capacity and more about an orientation towards young people – one where listening and care co-exist with action and rights, held by an attitude of humility and respect.

The purpose of epistemic undoing is to achieve relationships with young people which are characterised by what we call relational epistemic safety. Working with the YPRF and the pilot analysis, we have developed a framework that describes four ways of knowing young people (see [Figure 1](#)). We offer this as a way towards meaningful relationships of safety between professions and young people in the context of EFH.

Referring to the four elements that make up relational epistemic safety – firstly, 'knowing personally' involves how professionals need to see, like and know young people for who they are as individuals, rather seeing young people as a homogenous group who can all stand in for each other. This involves sensitive human connections characterised by reciprocity, kindness and care. Secondly, 'knowing contextually' involves individuals and systems making room for those things that cannot be immediately seen – experiences of discrimination and inequality and the adaptation young people might have made so as to cope and survive, including, the impact of

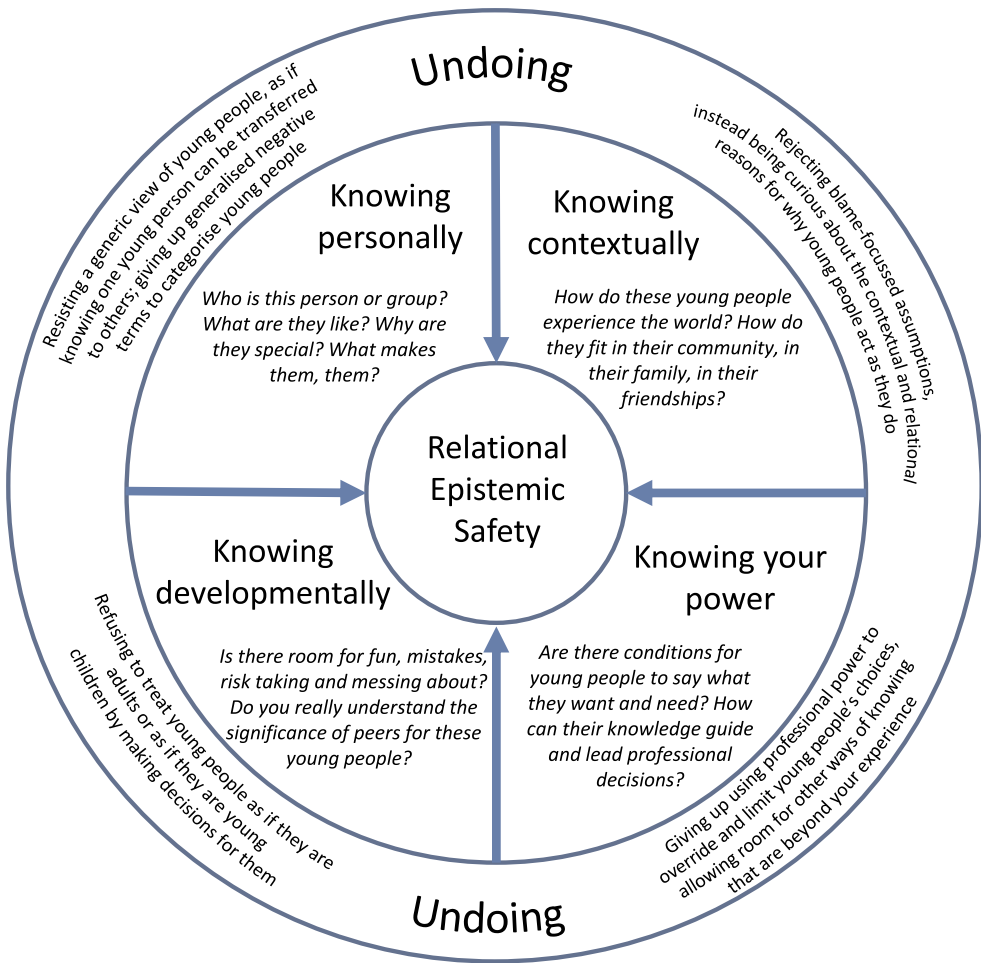


Figure 1. Relational epistemic safety.

trauma. It is about understanding the connections between where young people live, the communities they grow up in, their history and friendships and the choices they have about how they navigate the world. Thirdly, ‘knowing developmentally’ is about recognising the significance of young people’s need to have fun, to make mistakes, to be with their friends and mess about. It is about seeing the fluid nature of agency, and appreciating how it can change according to the social conditions in a particular context. The fourth way, ‘knowing your power’ point to the work required of practitioners, leaders and systems to contend with their use of power in relationships with young people. Professionals need to approach the other three ways of knowing with a critical awareness of how adult knowledge is privileged over that of young people, especially young people who are poor, seen as trouble, and are not white. A commitment to these ways of knowing require self-critique and curiosity but could lead to new possibilities for professionals working with young people to create safer communities.

Conclusion

In the UK, we are at a critical point in our understanding of how to create safety for young people who face harm beyond their family homes. Contextual Safeguarding has received much traction, but it is governed by an inconsistent policy framework and lacks national practice guidance (Firmin and Knowles 2020). Consequently, there are myriad interpretations and iterations, some of which stray from the ethical principles with which it is underpinned. This paper shows that Contextual Safeguarding practice should prioritise relationships that centre young people's ways of knowing. We need to foster professional cultures which encourage adults to reflect on their power privilege over young people. This is both an ethical imperative and also offers a route towards effective practice, as it more likely to lead to relationship that create safety for young people (Smithson and Jones 2021). Epistemic undoing involves an honest reckoning with adult professional power and challenging the everyday, unseen injustices that we enact because of its misuse – the overlooking, downplaying or ignoring of young people's experiences, views and needs. Let us build on the current interest in EFH, and enthusiasm for Contextual Safeguarding, to create radically new ways of relating to young people.

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