

# Opportunities for peer safeguarding intervention

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A briefing following fieldwork with Safer London

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## Introduction

Young people's peer relationships are significant to their wellbeing and safety. Peers can be a source of both risk and protection, sometimes simultaneously.

This briefing shares learning from a research project that explored the potential for peer interventions within [Safer London](#), a voluntary sector support service for young Londoners affected by exploitation or violence.

It is co-authored by Katie Latimer from the Contextual Safeguarding Research Project at the University of Bedfordshire and Carly Adams Elias, Organisational Lead for Exploitation at Safer London.

The authors reflect the principal learning from the original study, which took place between August and December 2019 and was presented in an internal report to Safer London in January 2020. This briefing also shares additional detailed examples of work within Safer London as the organisation continues to develop safeguarding interventions that work with the significant social relationships in young people's lives.

The following findings are presented below:

1. Peer interventions take various forms: safeguarding work with peers can involve group work with connected young people, but this is not always the case.
2. Peer interventions are most appropriately used alongside other practice that understands and intervenes with the social conditions of abuse, including interventions with other extra-familial contexts.
3. Peer relationships can be protective and, for this reason, relevant to safeguarding
4. Practitioners can work with peer relationships without necessarily *identifying* all the connected young people concerned

## Review structure

This document briefly summarises our methodology, before turning to findings and conclusions.

## Definitions

We use the same definitions of 'young people' and 'peer' as the literature review conducted to inform the research project. This literature review can be found [here](#); the definitions are repeated below.

'Young people' refers to people aged between 10 and 24 inclusive. This aligns with the World Health Organisation's use of the term, and refers to a demographic group recognised increasingly in UK policy and practice – for instance, by the Mental Health Taskforce to the NHS in England (2016).

For the purposes of this report, the term 'peer' describes a relationship between two or more young people. These young people will be similar ages, and have a social connection of some kind. Although, according to this definition, both these conditions are necessary, it gives scope for relative closeness / distance of age and social relationships. The below grid provides examples.

	<b>Relatively close social connection</b>	<b>Relatively distant social connection</b>
<b>Relatively close in age</b>	A small group of 'best friends', who are the same age, who live in the area, have family connections, and attend the same school.	Two young people, a couple of months apart in age, who have never spoken, but attend the same the school, in different school year groups.
<b>Relatively distant in age</b>	Two siblings who have lived together their whole lives but are four years apart in age. (This is an example of how peer and familial networks can overlap.)	Two young people, several years apart in age, who live locally to each other, and spend time in the same park after school, but have never met.

*Table 1 Examples of variance within peer relationship*

## Methodology

This briefing draws upon some data and examples from a research project with Safer London in 2019. This involved interviews and focus groups with staff (n=7), review of practice and policy documents (n=34), and observations of practice (n=2). The study was given ethical approval from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire. It was commissioned by Safer London and funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime.

Informed consent was sought for involvement in the initial study. Given the value of the learning for the sector more widely, a proposal was made to publish the findings in an external document. All participants were approached and invited to withdraw consent for this means of dissemination.

We also use examples from Safer London's subsequent work to develop peer interventions. These have been provided by Safer London with the consent and knowledge of the organisation's leadership and the practitioners involved. All casework examples are anonymised and they focus on practice responses rather than young people's experiences.

Additionally, a draft of this briefing was shared with Safer London staff. This process led to comments, clarifications and ideas that have been incorporated into the document.

The initial project with Safer London, and this briefing, belong to a wider programme of research to explore Contextual Safeguarding. Safer London and the Contextual Safeguarding Project at the University of Bedfordshire are active partners in developing Contextual Safeguarding in practice. Alongside her position as Organisational Lead for Exploitation at Safer London, Carly Adams Elias has been seconded part-time to the University of Bedfordshire as a Youth Work Practice Adviser (2020-2022).

## Findings

### 1. Peer interventions take various forms: Safeguarding work with peers can involve group work with connected young people, but this is not always the case

Five principal forms of peer interventions have been identified within the academic literature (Brodie and Latimer with Firmin, 2020):

1. Peer education
2. Peer mentoring
3. Group work
4. Community interventions
5. Online Peer Support Interventions

The accompanying literature review (cited above) provides an overview of each of these. It also gives examples about how specific programmes may employ multiple of the above techniques when working with connected young people. The listed forms are not mutually exclusive: a peer education programme could be delivered online, for instance.

Peer interventions also vary depending on whether they are delivered to (members of) a pre-existing peer group, or to young people who have a relatively weak social connection in advance of the intervention. Figure 1 below shows these variables in the case of group work:

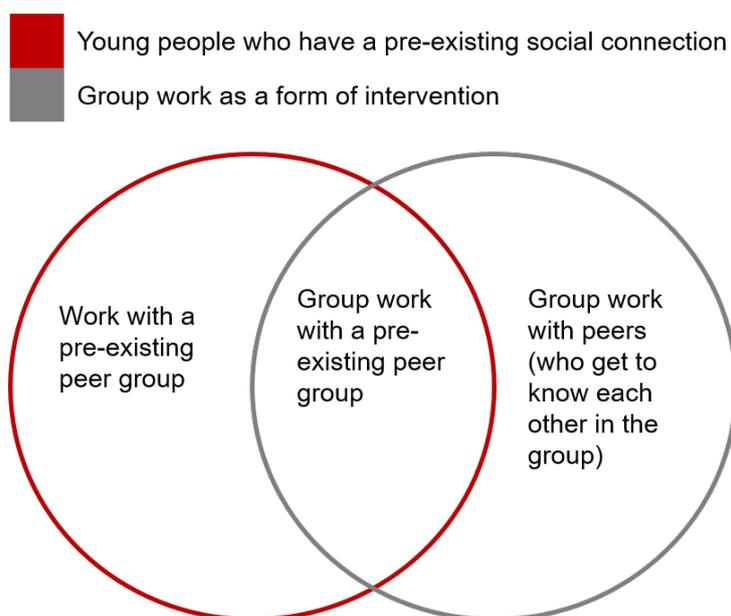


Figure 1 Peer interventions can, but do not always, involve work with young people who know each other. Diagram reproduced from Brodie and Latimer with Firmin (2020)

Fieldwork with Safer London provided examples of peer intervention that could be placed within the three segments of the Venn diagram in Figure 1. These were:

- a. One-to-one casework that included consideration of a young person's relationship with their romantic partner (a significant peer), but did not involve group work with the couple;
- b. Joint sessions with friends who were initially referred to Safer London as individuals;
- c. A series of workshops delivered to groups of school children, who were selected for the intervention by their teachers, and who may or may not already know each other.

Figure 2 maps these three examples on to the Venn diagram:

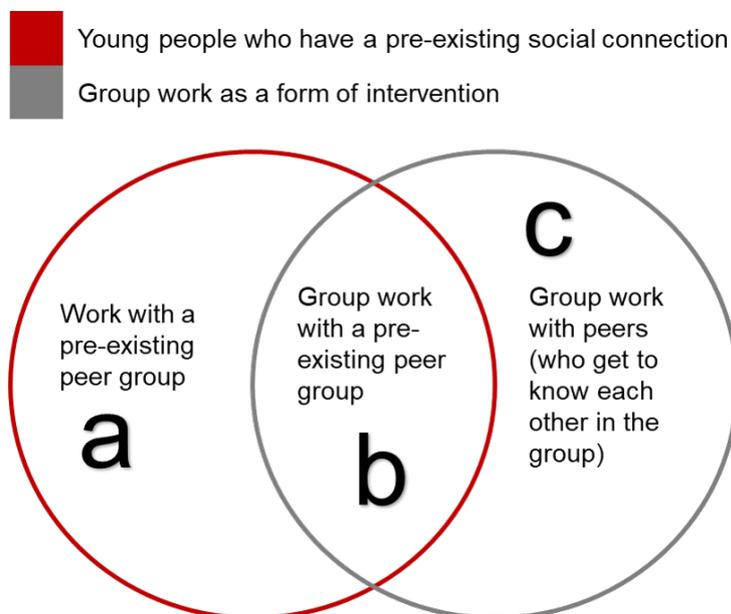


Figure 3 Venn diagram from Figure 2 with the letters to indicate the corresponding examples of peer work within Safer London

## **2. Peer interventions are most appropriately used alongside other practice that understands and intervenes with the social conditions of abuse, including interventions with other extra-familial contexts.**

Alongside the research project in 2019, Safer London developed a five-year strategy, entitled 'People, Peers and Places'. This strategy communicates an ambition to offer interventions across intra- and extra- familial contexts.

Beyond this, the organisation's leadership intends to join together its responses across contexts. The following case example illustrates emerging practice to simultaneously address multiple relevant contexts:

- Three young people were referred individually to Safer London for one-to-one support due to concerns about risk of harm to them from exploitation or violence.
- The young people attended the same education provision, although the referrals received made no mention of the education provision as a place of safety, or otherwise, for the young people.
- Separately, a Safer London practitioner became aware, from a multi-agency forum focused on exploitation, that the education provision had been targeted by older young people wishing to engage with its pupils. Professionals at the forum were concerned that these relationships could be exploitative.
- After considering the link between the individual referrals and the concern about the educational provision, a Prevention Advocate from Safer London reached out directly to the Safeguarding Leads at the educational provision to offer support to address some of the highlighted issues. (The Prevention Advocate's role is primarily focussed on exploring how to apply contextual safeguarding approaches in places and spaces where young people may experience harm.)

- In partnership with the Safeguarding Leads, Safer London developed a plan to offer targeted peer group sessions with pupils. These were not focussed solely on those referred for individual support.
- Additionally Safer London agreed to support the setting to consider any physical and placed based safety measures they could use to improve the young people's experience of safety in the settings.
- These measures would be delivered alongside support and awareness raising for the staff about exploitation, trauma, and Contextual Safeguarding approaches to consider how staff can respond to concerns arising in the education provision.
- The aim of this was to address the interconnected needs of the individuals, the peer groups and the setting, with a view to providing a safer space for all those accessing the educational provision, at this time and in the future.

The above example shows how a young person's experience within one context is likely to be intertwined with their experience within other contexts. Were Safer London to focus its support in one area only – e.g. one-to-one support for the individual referred – it may leave unaddressed issues in another relevant context, which could affect the success and sustainability of the intervention.

### 3. Peer relationships can be protective and, for this reason, relevant to safeguarding

Academic literature delineates multiple ways in which young people can support each other in relatively formal professional-facilitated interventions (Brodie and Latimer with Firmin, 2020).

Alongside this, Safer London practitioners provided numerous examples of the ways in which young people support each other informally, without this being facilitated or overseen by professionals. Table 2 below shows themes that emerged from practitioner discussions of this informal support. Bracketed numbers highlight instances when practitioners gave the same words or phrases more than once. Similar words and phrases are grouped together. The most prevalent ideas are shown at the top of the columns.

Practical	Emotional	Both practical and emotional
'Buying food' or 'sharing food' (3)	Listening (3) / someone to talk to (2) / 'an audience to their ambition'	Advice (3) / 'Ideas about how to keep each other safe'
'A place to stay' (3)	'Reassurance' / 'confidence' / 'Being a "cheerleader"' / 'Moral support'	'Things to do' / 'Places to go' / 'Positive activities' / 'Opportunities to learn new skills and gain confidence'
'Picking them up from (dangerous) situations' (2)	'Freedom' / 'Openness' / 'Lack of judgement' / 'The opportunity to "come out"'	'Companionship' / 'Someone to catch the bus with' / 'Going to appointments together'
'Providing with physical items if things are not going well at home, e.g. clothes, food, money'	'Sharing experiences' / 'Shared experience' / 'Understanding'	'Invitations to social events, opportunities to meet new people and make new friends' / 'providing with contacts and a wider network, including parents'

'Using each other's phones to contact family / professionals'	'A benchmark for being "normal"'	'Keeping secrets' / 'Lying for someone or "providing cover"'
'Seeking help from professionals on behalf of a peer'	'Hugs'	'Standing up for someone' / 'back up in a difficult situation'
	'[Friends] become family'	'Protection during hard times'
		'Someone to call [when missing or as a 'get out']'
		'Being an active bystander'
		Offer sustainable support

Table 2 Ways in which young people support each other - quotations from practitioners

These insights from practitioners, about the informal support that young people offer each other, indicate:

1. How valuable this support and protection can be for young people.
2. Considerable variety in the kinds of informal support that young people offer each other: the examples above range from almost universal features of friendships – e.g. 'someone to talk to' – to meeting each other's basic needs for food and accommodation.
3. The potential benefits of protective adults understanding this informal support better. Without this understanding, professionals and other protective adults cannot help young people navigate peer support. Skilled and informed professionals could help young people to support each other and to look after themselves, including recognising when the pressures of peer support are too great.

#### **4. Practitioners can work with peer relationships without necessarily identifying all the connected young people concerned**

Research to support the development of Contextual Safeguarding highlights the potential value of visual 'peer maps' to depict peer connections (Firmin, 2019; Sloane et al, 2019). Related to peer mapping, questions are often, rightly, asked about data security and the legal basis upon which this sensitive personal information is stored. Whilst it is possible to collect and store data about peer relationships in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the interest of safeguarding children, it is often not necessary or appropriate to gather peer information that *identifies* individuals.

As part of the 2019 research project, practitioners within Safer London described ways in which they would broach conversations with young people about their peer networks, without asking for names and other identifying details. We provide below an example of such practice, inspired by current work within Safer London:

##### **Peer mapping with an individual young person – the activity:**

Safer London practitioners undertake informal peer mapping exercises and encourage young people to reflect on their peer relationships, including the friends they consider supportive and protective. This can be done using art materials, colour coding, pictures, or other creative materials. Young people can talk about how their peer relationships make them feel without

referencing any individuals. If they want to reference specific individuals, they can use colours or shapes as representative of these people, without sharing names. Or, if they feel comfortable, they can use descriptors such as 'best friend', 'primary school friend', 'neighbour', etc.

To support the activity, practitioners can ask questions to facilitate a more detailed understanding of the young person's experience of peer relationships. These could include questions about group dynamics, as well as questions about the young person's relationships with individuals. The former questions do not require the young person to share information that could expose individual peers. These questions can also convey information that would be lost if the practitioner asked only about bilateral relationships: a social group is more than the sum of its parts.

Example questions practitioners can ask to explore group dynamics:

- How do the people depicted interact with each other – i.e. do all their friends all know each other? Do they get along? Is there one main group or several groups?
- How would an outsider describe the group? How could an outsider become an insider?
- How does the group like to spend time?
- Where does the group like to spend time? Where is the group most relaxed?
- What keeps the group together? What do individuals in the group have in common?

Example questions practitioners can ask about specific relationships:

- Who are you close to?
- Who can you go to for advice or if you have a problem?
- Who, if anyone, could you speak to for hours?
- Who would protect you or stick up for you if needed? Who would you stick up for?
- Is there anyone you would not want to share things with?
- Who can you trust?
- Who have you chosen to be in your life?
- Who might you get in trouble with?
- Who might get negatively labelled, e.g. as a 'bad influence'? What do you think about that perception/label?<sup>1</sup>

The practitioner can encourage the young person to plot this out over a large sheet of paper. The practitioner might suggest that they put those they are closest to nearer to them in the centre. The young person may also want to locate adult and family relationships on the same diagram; this can illustrate the ways in which peer and family networks can overlap.

It can also be interesting to explore the young person's views about the perspectives of people in the map, e.g. 'what do you think your [best friend, mother, brother, etc...] would say about this map?' or 'how would your [teacher] describe your school friends?'

### **The benefits of this approach to peer mapping:**

The activity above can be the start of a continuing conversation that evolves the practitioner's understanding of the young person's peer relationships and what these relationships mean to them.

Adults often make assumptions about the role that peers may play, and this kind of activity

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<sup>1</sup> It is important when asking questions like this that the facilitator makes it clear they are not judging and they do not think it is helpful to label people in this way – whilst recognising that many in society do label others. This alone can open some very useful conversations

gives opportunity for the young person to be heard and the value of their peer relationships to be acknowledged and celebrated.

This can lay an important foundation for creating respect and safety in the relationship between the practitioner and the young person, and enable the young person to feel safe enough to discuss their experiences of their peer relationships once trust is earned.

**Ethical considerations:**

Being clear about confidentiality and its limits is crucial to building this trust. As with all work with young people, the Safer London practitioner will explain that they would have to share information from the sessions if they become worried about anyone's safety. This enables young people to make an informed decision about what they disclose. A young person may choose to share information about a peer they are worried about precisely because they want a professional intervention. Equally, they may be worried about getting peers into trouble by telling professionals about them. The practitioner can build trust by asking the young person to pause before identifying friends, and – if the general information shared does worry the practitioner about an individual within the peer network – the practitioner can explain this to the young person and request identifying information for a specific purpose, e.g. to offer this young person support via Safer London casework.

Similarly, it is important to explain to the young person where the map will be stored and who will see it. The young person may choose not to allow the practitioner to keep a copy of the map. If the young person wants to keep hold of the map, the practitioner may suggest that they store it somewhere safe, due to its private nature. It may also be appropriate to ask the young person for consent to share the map with someone specific – e.g. a social worker or parent – and to plan this conversation with them.

## Concluding note

We hope the ideas above are as helpful to you as they have been to the both the research team and Safer London.

The Contextual Safeguarding Research Project at the University of Bedfordshire is currently working with 10 local authorities across England and Wales to embed Contextual Safeguarding, including work with peers. In support of this work, the findings above help to:

- Identify various forms of peer intervention and help researchers to present practitioners with options as they design their interventions (Finding 1);
- Locate work with peers alongside work with other extra- and intra- familial contexts (Finding 2);
- Highlight the value and importance of work with peers, whilst simultaneously casting the discussion about young people's social relationships in a positive light (Finding 3);
- Demonstrate that work to understand peer relationships can be completed *alongside* young people in ways that respects their personal information and consent. Peer mapping is not a tool to increase surveillance of young people (Finding 4).

Safer London has launched its five year strategy with a commitment to delivering and developing services across a spectrum of interconnected contexts: People, Peers and Places. Safer London has always recognised the value of working with peers but looks forward to developing this further. In support of this work, the findings above help to:

- Identify existing strengths to build on and areas for development in how Safer London engage in work with peers; including exploring new models of peer to peer support (Finding 1);
- Develop the interventions with peer groups so that they align with and work alongside other support offered in extra- and intra- familial contexts – particularly one-to-one and place-based interventions (Finding 2);
- Act as a reminder to prioritise engaging with young people to access the supportive and protective elements of their peer relationships, and to encourage them to be active bystanders through individual and group-based peer interventions (Finding 3);
- Develop new processes for recording work with peers and for incorporating peer mapping exercises into group-based peers work (Finding 4).

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the staff at Safer London who contributed their time and expertise as part of the 2019 research project and in subsequent conversations about the content of this briefing. The examples we use are credit to the breadth and depth of practitioners' work with young Londoners.

Thank you to Jackie Bolton at Safer London for facilitating the embedded research.

Finally, the 2019 research project would not have been possible without funding from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime.

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