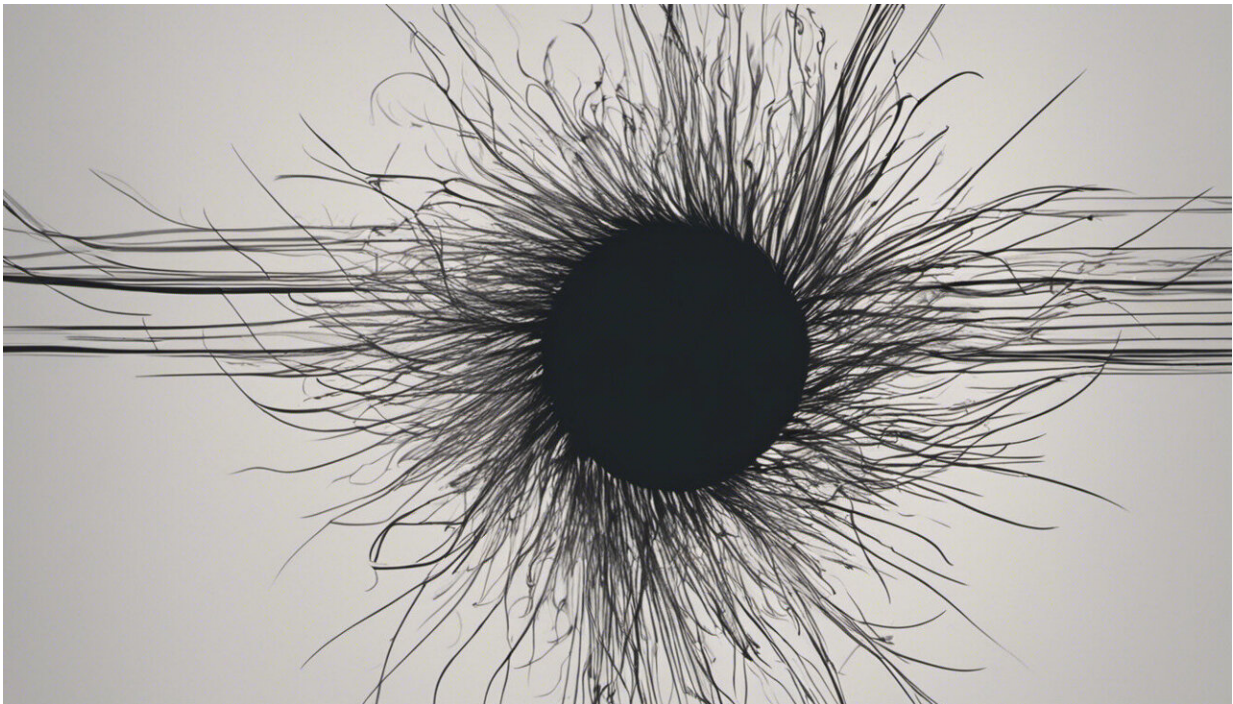


Social workers are trying new ways to keep teenagers safe

September 13 2019, by Nick Marsh



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Over the past four decades the child protection system in England has increasingly [concentrated on preventing](#) the abuse and neglect of young children in their homes. In response to multiple government inquiries, such as those following the killing of eight-year-old [Victoria Climbié](#) and 17-month-old, [Peter Connelly](#) (known as "Baby P"), the focus has

been to reduce risk and prevent the abuse and neglect of young children by those looking after them.

But with this focus on [younger children](#) and the harm posed by parents and carers, the system largely stopped considering risks that young people, particularly teenagers, face when they leave their front door. This has left teenagers under-protected.

Young people have been groomed and sexually abused by adults across towns and cities throughout the UK in [high-profile](#) cases of child [sexual exploitation](#). Reports are also emerging of teenagers exploited by criminal gangs who use them as drug runners or to move money between different areas of the country along what are [known as "county lines"](#).

Teenagers exploited in this way are often victim to physical, emotional and sexual abuse as a form of control or punishment and are frequently trafficked to areas far away from their family and friends.

The bigger picture

When it comes to safeguarding—protecting children's rights and promoting their well-being—adolescents require a different response to younger children and to adults. Across the UK there are many well-respected approaches to safeguarding young people from harm that happens outside the home, such as the long-established [No Knives, Better Lives](#) in Scotland, which has contributed to a significant reduction in knife crime.

In England, [two recent approaches](#) gaining attention include "contextual safeguarding" and "complex safeguarding." Both of these bring together [social workers](#) and traditional child protection agencies, such as the police and [healthcare professionals](#), with other less traditional groups, such as taxi licensing and public transport companies, to help keep

children safe.

Contextual safeguarding has been initially piloted in the London borough of [Hackney](#), led by researcher Carlene Firmin from the University of Bedfordshire. It considers the places that children and young people go to outside their home and the relationships they make as opportunities for interventions. So this makes parks, public transport and schools all part of a possible intervention, moving away from focusing solely on the young person and the boundaries of their family life. For example, this means [including the staff](#) at the local fast food restaurant in a child's intervention plan, if this location is where they are at risk of exploitation or abuse.

Complex safeguarding, which is being developed in Greater Manchester using [evidence from ongoing research](#), takes a slightly different approach. It shifts the focus from what is going wrong in the young person's life and the risks they face, to how young people and those around them—including social workers, other agencies and their family—can collaborate to promote their wider well-being. This approach has been shown to [improve outcomes](#) for young people.

Take the example of a teenage boy who is struggling to fit into his new school—and his behavior at school and at home is becoming challenging. In an attempt to fit in, he frequently meets his peers at the local bus station. But at the bus station he is threatened and coerced into passing packages of money between drug dealers and storing weapons at his house. Traditional interventions may have focused solely on his behavior and what he and his parents can do to change it—including stopping him from going to the bus station. He may also have been treated as a criminal.

A complex or contextual safeguarding approach would instead focus on a spectrum of his needs. This may include helping him access positive

activities and hobbies to nurture his overall well-being and increase opportunities to make healthier friendships. They may also include ensuring the bus station is well lit and that its CCTV system is working. They could also include working with his parents to help educate them about child exploitation.

Working with parents

Part of the problem with the current system is that it principally relies on parents and carers and their actions to stop the abuse. But this isn't always effective if the harm happens outside of the house and outside of their control. A shift is needed so that the child protection system facilitates professionals to work with parents rather than overtly questioning their actions and holding them entirely responsible.

The [Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse](#) has published research showing how parents of sexually exploited children can become isolated through trauma and stigma, and how professionals can help them recover and build new support networks. Organisations such as [Parents Against Child Exploitation](#) not only provide support to parents, they also highlight how [parents](#) can play a crucial role in safeguarding their children from exploitation and abuse outside the home.

Considering the whole picture of a young person's life, including what happens at home, the context of their abuse and the perpetrators doing the abusing, as well as their overall well-being, is a key part of these approaches. All of these are essential if we are to stop blaming victims. When harm happens outside the home, plans and interventions must address the spaces, places and people that young people interact with. Successful plans also focus on the young person's overall well-being and not just the risks they face.

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