

Contextual Safeguarding

7-minute briefing



4. Types of Extra-Familial Risk

- Child sexual exploitation (peer or adult-led)
- Child criminal exploitation (including county lines, drug running, coercion)
- Serious youth violence
- Online grooming, sextortion and digital coercion
- Harmful peer group norms (e.g., coercion, bullying, harassment)

These occur in spaces where parents may have little influence, requiring multi-agency action that extends into the community, education settings, and online platforms. Partnership with parents and carers is key. Supporting them to recognise risks and maintain strong, protective relationships can help prevent circumstances that might draw young people into harmful environments.

1. What is Contextual Safeguarding?

Contextual safeguarding is an approach that recognises that children and young people can experience significant harm in extra-familial environments including peer groups, schools, neighbourhoods, online spaces, and community settings. These harms can include sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, youth violence, coercion and harmful peer relationships. Exploitation can be organised or facilitated by groups or networks of peers or adults

Parents may have limited ability to influence or control these environments. To put contextual safeguarding into practice, services need to change how they work and how they think.

5. Shift in Practice

Contextual safeguarding expands traditional child protection practice by requiring:

- **Assessment of locations**, not just individuals (e.g. parks, transport hubs, schools).
- **Engagement with stakeholders** who influence those environments - schools, community workers, local businesses, peers.
- **Interventions targeting context**, such as environmental changes, increased supervision, community safety partnerships, or school-based interventions.
- **Information sharing** across sectors to understand patterns and hotspots.

2. Why it matters

Young people often spend increasing time in spaces outside the home as they grow older. In these settings, they may encounter peer influence, exploitation, grooming, intimidation, violence or online harm.

Traditional safeguarding focuses on parents and carers, but contextual safeguarding widens the lens to the social, peer and environmental factors including groups and networks that shape risk. It aligns with GIRFEC, strengthening how we explore a child's wider world across universal, additional and intensive levels

6. Multi-Agency Responsibilities

Responding to harm outside the home requires coordinated involvement from:

- Social Work
- Police
- Education
- Health
- Youth Services
- Third Sector organisations
- Community partners (housing, community safety, local businesses).

Multi-agency partners share responsibility for recognising and responding to risks in the places young people spend time, working together to influence the environments that shape their safety

3. National Guidance Expectations

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2021, updated 2023) formally embeds contextual safeguarding within statutory child protection practice. It recognises that harm may occur “in a range of contexts for all children, pre-birth to 18 years” and emphasises that Child Protection Plans should focus on changing conditions in harmful environments, not solely the behaviour of the young person affected.

7. What Practitioners Should Do Now

- Be alert to risk indicators in peer groups, online, and community settings - not just family environments.
- Use contextual assessment tools (e.g. safety mapping, context weighting, peer group assessment).
Access here : [Tools](#)
- Apply child protection procedures when a young person is at significant risk of harm in community, peer or online contexts, not only when concerns relate to the family home.
- Think “beyond the home” when analysing risk and planning interventions.