Moving on from Munro

Improving children’s services

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Moving on with Munro: child sexual exploitation within a child protection framework

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**Introduction**

This chapter argues for a conceptual shift in our understanding of child protection. Drawing on some of the key lessons from Munro’s (2011) review of child protection, it argues that our understanding of child protection must develop from one focused on protecting younger children from abuse in the home to one incorporating the protection of older children from abuse located and experienced outside the home.

The chapter uses child sexual exploitation (CSE) as an example to illustrate the complexities of extending the child protection framework to embrace the needs of older children, particularly adolescents. It develops Munro’s call for a systemic approach to understanding the difficulties faced by those working in child protection and her request for relationship-based thinking to inform the supervision of practitioners, helping them manage the anxieties that emerge when responding to difficult and emotive casework. It argues that future policy and practice to protect children from sexual exploitation should not only be modelled on reviews of recent cases where abusers have been prosecuted. Rather than using these reviews to blame individual practitioners for failing to recognise the exploitation of a child, it calls for a more nuanced understanding of the social context in which the practitioner is functioning. This is particularly relevant for practitioners understanding the social context in which a child’s capacity to consent to sexual activity may be abused.
I argue that relationship-based child protection interventions with older children could be enhanced through learning action partnerships (LAPs). Originally developed by staff working with the Oak Foundation developing sustainable interventions to prevent child abuse, LAPs offer a model of engaging with young people as partners, recognising their capacity either to engage or disengage from the support and protection offered by children’s services. LAPs provide us with a model for developing safeguarding with adolescents, who, unlike babies or toddlers, have the capacity to exert their own agency through taking safeguarding into their own hands, by ‘going missing’ or by rejecting support through other means.

In summary, the chapter moves through three stages. First, it notes that most discourses about ‘child protection’, including those addressed by the Munro review, have, in the main, overlooked the needs of vulnerable older teenagers who are being abused as they approach adulthood. Second, it draws on research with young people who have been sexually exploited to illustrate the multiple child protection needs that may be presented by older children. Third, it draws on some of the principles advocated in the Munro report to propose LAPs as a model for relationship-based engagement with young people as safeguarding partners. This relates to Munro’s call for relationship-based interventions, suggesting a model of how these may be advanced with older young people in need of safeguarding and protection from abuse.

**Recognising sexually exploited young people within a child protection framework**

While there are excellent lessons to be learnt from Munro, many of which are outlined later, there is an overarching problem that needs to be addressed. The review, as with social work overall, has assumed that child protection means safeguarding younger children from abuse in their own homes (Jago et al, 2011; Pearce, 2013a). Munro notes:

> When the Secretary of State for Education commissioned this review of child protection in June 2010, a central question was ‘what helps professionals make the best
This original question begs two further questions: what do we mean by ‘vulnerable’ and who is a ‘child’? When considered through the lens of child protection policy, practice and training, we think of ‘vulnerable’ as pertaining to a child’s exposure to danger in the home, usually from parents or carers, and a ‘child’ as being under 10 years old. Rarely is the vulnerability of the older young person embraced by child protection discourses (Rees et al, 2011; Warrington, 2013). Moreover, early intervention is assumed to be preventive work with the family during the ‘early’ years of a child’s life rather than early intervention to embrace the needs of a teenager in transition to adulthood (Coleman, 2012).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone up to the age of 18 and outlines all children’s right to protection from abuse and harm (United Nations, 1989). Research with older children has noted significant threats to their safety, which may emerge from sexual exploitation, peer-on-peer violence, gang-related violence and associated online abuse (Barter, 2009, 2011; Firmin, 2010, 2011). In the main, most of these threats occur outside, rather than inside, the home environment. Other forms of violence often experienced by older children connected to, though not necessarily perpetrated in, the family home arise through ‘honour-based’ violence and other gender-based domestic violence (Meetoo and Mirza, 2007; Sharpe, 2013). While some older children may welcome support to prevent, challenge and manage these threats, others may aggressively reject support, resisting it for fear of identification, the worry of family shame or ‘dishonour’, or through a lack of recognition of the abuse itself, alongside a desire to exercise choice and agency in decision-making about friends and relationships. The young person may retaliate with behaviour that labels them as ‘offender’ rather than ‘victim’, may actively avoid appointments, and may challenge or discard help from carers and parents. They may take action into their own hands with repeated episodes of ‘going missing’, episodes that invariably increase their vulnerability and take them further into the control of abusers.
While the young person is clearly a victim of abuse, they themselves may not perceive or understand this to be so and may ‘choose’ to reject support that they feel they do not need, do not trust or do not understand.

It has been argued that the complexities facing children’s services trying to identify and respond to these issues have not been incorporated into child protection training, are under-researched and are poorly developed (Berelowitz et al, 2013). Indeed, much of the focus in the Munro review is on dangers facing the ‘child’ (invariably assumed to be a young child) in the ‘family’ and on the anxieties facing practitioners trying to manage associated risks:

First, abuse and neglect occur (although not exclusively) in the privacy of the family home so they are not readily identified … there are difficult decisions to make about whether the parents can be helped to keep children safe from harm or whether the child needs to be removed. (Munro, 2011, pp 17–18)

Although it is acknowledged in this quotation that abuse and neglect are not exclusively experienced in the home, the ‘difficult decisions’ are seen to focus on whether or not to remove the child from home. In contrast, much of the research on the risks facing adolescents focuses on risks outside, rather than inside, the home environment. In the case of sexual exploitation, those who manipulate and abuse have an invested interest in drawing the child away from the home, separating them from family or carer support (Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation, 2013). In cases of peer-on-peer violence and gang-associated sexual violence, adolescents may not confide in parents/carers or extended family members, who may themselves feel separated from threats outside their grasp or understanding. For example, a recent analysis of interviews and focus groups involving 188 young people living in gang-affected areas found that 65% of those who spoke of sexual violence had knowledge of sexually exploitative situations, 41% shared knowledge of incidents of individual perpetrator rape and 34% shared knowledge of multiple
perpetrator rape. Despite this high level of knowledge of sexual violence, few understood the legal context or meaning of rape or sexual assault, and only one in 12 of these respondents said they expected young people to talk about this abuse. Those who would talk about it would talk to a peer rather than to a professional or family member (Beckett et al, 2013). Similar findings from other research about peer-on-peer sexual violence and teen dating violence show that the violence often implodes in peer groups away from the family or home setting, few young people will report or discuss the violence they experience with carers/parents, and many have little or confused understanding of the legal status of victims and perpetrators of violence (Firmin, 2011; Wood et al, 2011; Coy et al, 2013; Khan et al, 2013). In these situations, the ‘difficult decisions’ may not be about whether to remove the adolescent from home (although this is a possibility that cannot be excluded if cause for concern is linked to worries about familial abuse), but more about how to support parents/carers to identify and understand incidents of abuse taking place outside their home domain. It may also involve difficult decisions about the appropriateness of specific placements for young people who are placed in local authority care, or looked after. Once the abuse is recognised, further difficult decisions revolve around how to share information between the different professionals who should be involved in safeguarding adolescents and their peer groups, how to support families, carers and young people through the process of providing intelligence that could be used as evidence in a prosecution, and how to ensure that a multi-agency strategy holds the young people’s welfare at heart.

Child sexual exploitation: a case study

To elaborate this point just a little further, I briefly draw on research from work with older teenagers affected by CSE. Until 2000, children ‘involved in prostitution’ could be prosecuted for soliciting offences, essentially penalised for behaviours that resulted from their abuse. In 2009, CSE was fully incorporated into the safeguarding children agenda, using the following definition:
Involves exploitative situations/contexts/relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive ‘something’ … as a result of performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities … In all cases those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p 9)

This definition, used in the Coalition government’s Tackling child sexual exploitation action plan (Department for Education, 2011), notes the vulnerability of the child and the power of the abuser, guiding policy and practice to focus attention on CSE as a child protection issue. Despite this, the nature of the abuse is poorly understood (Melrose and Pearce, 2013). Definitions continue to assume that the perpetrator is an adult rather than embrace the possibility of a young person being both victim and a perpetrator (Firmin, 2013). We still lack a comprehensive overview of the numbers affected and the variety of forms of abuse experienced. A review by the Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre (2011) noted information on 1,875 cases of ‘localised grooming’. However, it identified problems with its own limited definition of CSE and with reviewing the different data recorded by police and children’s services. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) for England clarified that data monitoring was inadequate, leaving gaps in our knowledge of the extent and nature of CSE. Despite generic problems with data monitoring, the OCC inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups noted 2,409 confirmed victims, and 16,500 cases recorded to be ‘at risk’ of CSE over a 14-month period (Berelowitz et al, 2013). A review of CSE in Northern Ireland noted it to be an issue of concern for one in seven young people known to social services, with a further one in five at significant risk (Beckett, 2011). These research findings shows that, even with inadequate data-recording systems, evidence of widespread abuse through CSE exists, with young people in their teens being most at risk.

Research has shown that some factors increase teenagers’ vulnerability to CSE. A disproportionate number of young people
with learning difficulties are sexually exploited: a review of 461 cases showed 67 (15%) to have special educational needs (Jago et al, 2011). Although most identified victims are female, boys are also known to experience sexual exploitation (Lillywhite and Skidmore, 2006; Barnardo’s, 2011; Beckett, 2011); and while recent media attention has suggested that CSE is a problem arising from the abuse of white girls by men of Pakistani origin, this is a limited picture, challenged by extensive research which shows that CSE can take place both within and across all communities (Barnardo’s, 2011; Berelowitz et al, 2013; Melrose and Pearce; 2013). The dominance of the ‘white girl’ victim discourse has been challenged by the Muslim Women’s Network review of 35 case studies from across England. This noted that Muslim young women could be affected by CSE: the majority of the victims in the study were between 13 and 14 years and the perpetrators were of Afghani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, white and mixed heritage backgrounds. The review found that many of the victims of sexual exploitation in the study were being overlooked by front-line agencies and little, if anything, was being done to identify them (Muslim Women’s Network, 2013).

Despite evidence from this and other research, our awareness of the need to protect older children from CSE is limited, with few local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) having effective methods to protect young people and prosecute abusers (Jago et al, 2011). This is beginning to change as public awareness increases, cases are taken to court and perpetrators are prosecuted, and as inspectorates, such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), review LSCBs’ progress in monitoring and responding to CSE. However, lessons from the Munro review warn us against an over-reliance on lessons from one-off Ofsted inspections or one-off serious case reviews. She warns against a sudden rush for a new policy or procedure as the cure for all ills, and against restricting our learning to findings from reviews that target failings in an individual without due acknowledgement of the failings of the whole system in which the individual works. Munro overtly calls for ‘a move from a compliance to a learning culture’ (Munro, 2011, p 5) and warns:
Mechanisms for improvement have been pressure on professionals to try harder; reducing scope for individual judgment by adding procedures and rules; and increasing the level of monitoring to ensure compliance with them. (Munro, 2011, p 19)

These warnings against a culture of compliance and against an over-reliance on policy and procedure strategy documents are as applicable to developing interventions to work with CSE as they are to protecting younger children from abuse in the home. In a review of practitioners’ responses to trafficked young people, many of whom were trafficked for sexual exploitation, it was noted that some of the excellent policies developed to offer referral routes and frameworks for good practice were ineffective without the support and supervision of staff. The impact of the extent of abuse uncovered by workers, the fast turnover of staff and the pessimism that little could be done to protect the child meant that few practitioners had confidence in the effectiveness of a written procedure without care of staff and supervision of their work (Pearce et al, 2013). Similar findings emerged from a review of LSCB interventions (Jago et al, 2011). Children who have been sexually exploited want to be trusted, want to be believed and want supported workers to stay with them throughout the process of identification, engagement and eventual prosecution of the abuser. The following quotes are from two different young women from recent research on CSE in gang-affected neighbourhoods. The first suggests why young women may not disclose their experience of abuse, and the second suggests why young people may not trust adults (professionals) to protect them:

“She’ll be scared, they will make her not even wanna speak again … she wouldn’t be able to tell no one, it will be that bad.” (Young woman, aged 15, quoted in Beckett et al, 2013, p 44)
And:

“I got raped and when I finally spoke to the police about it they let him on bail and he came looking for me – why do they do that?” (Young woman, aged 17, quoted in Beckett et al, 2013, p 45)

The arguments presented earlier suggest that child protection frameworks have overlooked the needs of sexually exploited children and young people, who may be assumed to be exerting choice and agency (thus perceived to be choosing a relationship that might, by default, be exploitative) or who either passively or aggressively can reject support and/or take actions into their own hands and ‘go missing’. Practitioners may not be trained to identify the abuse experienced by a young person as a result of CSE and may not feel equipped, supported or resourced to address the emerging problems. These and other factors contribute to child protection failing older exploited children, particularly those aged between 16 and 18, who are legally able to consent to sexual activity and who are in transition towards adulthood. Research on cases of CSE and reviews of children’s experiences of taking a case through court to prosecute abusers suggest that many victims are distrusted, disbelieved and assumed to hold some responsibility for the abuse they have received (Berelowitz et al, 2013). I have proposed elsewhere that a ‘social model’ for understanding why children may consent to their own abuse is needed (Pearce, 2013b). I have argued that our dependence on Fraser guidelines and Gillick competences have led to the assessment of a child’s ability to consent to sexual activity to depend on their capacity to understand and use contraceptives. This individual approach in a ‘medical model’ for thinking about consent to sexual activity restricts our understanding of the social pressures on the child to consent. Instead, I have argued that we need to develop a ‘social model’ of contextualising consent, one that addresses: the impact of being groomed for sexual exploitation; the impact of ‘normalisation’ of sexual violence between young people; the impact of poverty as a driver for ‘survival sex’ and the selling or swapping of sex for money, drugs or other benefits; and the impact of what I have
called ‘condoned consent’ – an overarching culture in professional discourse that some young people will choose a lifestyle that includes violence and abuse (Pearce, 2013b). More work is needed to fully understand these social pressures, which can be experienced independently or converge, resulting in the young person consenting to their own sexual exploitation. This is just one component to be incorporated in relationship-based engagement with young people as safeguarding partners in the child protection system.

Moving on from having identified CSE as a case study to illustrate some of the complexities involved in developing appropriate child protection interventions with adolescents, I outline in the following section some early considerations of what relationship-based engagement with young people as safeguarding partners may look like.

**Learning action partnerships as a framework for relationship-based engagement with young people as safeguarding partners in the child protection system**

I argued earlier that our child protection systems have been dominated by assumptions that the child (usually considered to be less than 10 years old) is at risk of abuse within the home. I have noted that this limits our efforts to identify, research and evaluate methods of engaging with older children who may be abused outside the home. While we might appreciate that child protection interventions with an older young person (particularly those aged 16–18) will be different from those with a baby or a young toddler, we are unfamiliar with how to engage with them to support them away from violence and abuse. Although managing child protection procedures for any young person is complex, adapting a system that has essentially been designed to protect younger children abused in the home to become one that is capable of engaging with older teenagers who may be abused outside the home presents us with unexplored challenges.

I have also argued that although some of the Munro review colludes with this specific failing, there are important generic messages to learn from her work. Munro argues that good practice is relationship-based: when the relationship between practitioner and client is prioritised,
a genuine engagement with and understanding of the problems can emerge. To make this effective, she strongly argues for social workers to be supported through ongoing supervision and support. While specific failings in an individual practitioner’s work may occur, these are best identified and addressed through supervision. Reviews and inspections that focus only on individual failings or successes overshadow the importance of reviewing the generic system within which individual practice occurs. Taking some of these lessons to address how older children may be supported through the child protection system, I describe how LAPs may offer scope for practice that engages with young people to advance their protection from harm. The proposal outlined below is simply an attempt to start a discussion about what engaging with older young people through safeguarding relationships might look like. Many similar arguments were proposed as a result of reviews of good practice undertaken in the OCC inquiry (Berelowitz et al, 2013), which advocates a ‘See Me, Hear Me’ framework for engaging with children at risk of abuse. The overarching principle underpinning lessons from Munro and from research on CSE is that the relationship with the child or young person is of paramount importance.

The application of a LAP as a means to develop a relationship with a young person in need of protecting has originated from preventative work with communities who have experienced disadvantage and discrimination (for more details, see the Oak Foundation: www.oakfnd.org). There are some generic principles behind LAPs. Partners come together with the understanding that, although they each hold separate and different bodies of knowledge, neither is privileged over the other. The partnership recognises that individuals in a relationship will be influenced by external pressures such as job roles and responsibilities, home environments, financial constraints and social and economic opportunities. The relationship that builds between the partners will depend on individuals’ understanding of the opportunities and constraints that each bring. The partners will agree to work together in order to learn from each other, giving time to find out about the others’ perspectives, skills, interests and objectives. Finally, the partnership, underpinned by shared learning, will produce agreed action. While LAPs have historically been used as a framework
to underpin sustainable community development, I am interested to see whether they might help approaches to engaging with young people in the child protection system. In summary, the principles behind LAPs are that partnerships are formed for learning and that partners develop agreed action to create change. This combination of learning, action and partnership is the foundation for developing sustainable interventions. I elaborate further on how this might inform the development of safeguarding relationships between young people and child protection practitioners in the following section.

Learning

The practitioner and the young person recognise that they can learn from each other. The practitioner recognises that they need to learn about the young person’s experience of abuse: on- or offline, peer-on-peer, gang-affected, or linked to status, love and experimentation. The young person recognises that they need to learn about what the practitioner can offer them: a non-abusive relationship with resources that may help the process of making informed decisions about a safer future. Through this relationship, the young person may recognise some of their own strengths and learn how to manage their feelings differently. Through the development of a non-abusive and supporting learning partnership, they may begin to realise that the sexual activity they thought they were consenting to is actually abusive. This learning relationship continues over time and, with enhanced sharing of information, focuses more and more on how the young person can play an active role in protecting themselves from further abuse.

Action

The young person and the practitioner agree small actions, each linked to developing change. The change for the practitioner emerges as they increasingly understand the context in which the young person is experiencing abuse. The change for the young person emerges as they become more aware of their skills and experience, gaining confidence in accessing resources to leave abusive contexts.
Partnership

Recognising that the young person has agency, the practitioner approaches them to request the development of a working partnership. The partnership recognises that both the practitioner and the young person have important knowledge and skills but that each are working under specific constraints, as well as having the ability to develop particular opportunities. It recognises that the young person has the capacity to engage with or to leave the support offered by the practitioner and that the young person is functioning with influence from peers, family and others in their lives. The partnership provides the foundation for the relationship between the young person and the practitioner. It needs continual review to check that it is based on recognition of the different attributes brought to the partnership by each individual.

Conclusion

If we are seriously engaged in a review of child protection, we must address how we can protect older children from abuse they may experience outside the home. The three components of a LAP identified earlier may offer a way to approach a young person who is at risk of, or experiencing, abuse or exploitation. They are based on the importance of shared knowledge, on the recognition of different strengths and resources brought to the partnership, and on an understanding that change and action will happen through relationship-based partnership work. They require each partner to recognise that the other has a voice and can exercise agency. As such, the LAP may provide a foundation for engaging with child protection issues with older young people. While there are obviously many questions to identify and address, the LAP provides a starting point for discussion about how to engage with older children who have been abused and who will make the decision about who to talk to and when. I quote from a practitioner interviewed about her work with exploited and abused young people:

“it’s getting away from the concept of reporting, because it’s not reporting. It’s a process through a relationship
where you meet people over a period of time and they will incrementally tell a little bit more to one trusted person, whilst being able to retain some control over their information and what happens.” (Professional in focus group B, quoted in Beckett et al, 2013, p 49)

This practitioner recognises the need for partnership with the young person, the need for time to allow the young person to develop trust and confidence, and the need for the young person to hold onto some control over their actions. These points echo some of the lessons we have learnt from Munro about the need for relationship-based interventions and the need for support and supervision for staff engaged with difficult and demanding child protection cases. Through developing relationships with and learning from young people who have experienced abuse, we can gain a better understanding of the social pressures they experience to consent to abusive sexual activity. Through these relationships, and through listening to young people, we can adapt our current child protection procedures to better safeguard older children as they approach adulthood.

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