



Introduction

Abstract Many professionals working with safeguarding responsibilities faced a two-pronged challenge of a lack of effective resources and training to support them, and personal experiences bleeding into the professional judgements. The Headstart Kernow project undertook a youth-focussed approach to understanding their use of digital technology and their needs of support from professionals in navigating these digital worlds.

Keywords Online safety · Digital resilience · Digital value bias · Critical thinking

Teacher: They play these violent video games, then they're violent in school.

Andy: No, there isn't much evidence of that.

Teacher: Well I've seen it.

Andy: There really isn't—this is a causation policy makers and the media have been trying to show for over 40 years and there is no evidence of it existing.

Teacher: Well, that's what I reckon. They shouldn't be allowed to play them.

The above is the paraphrasing of an exchange that took place during a training session in the project about which this book is written. The training was to broadly explore the issues arising from many discussions with young people related to “online safety”—the frequently discussed and, it seems, poorly understood term generally associated with the need to keep children “safe” online.

The training, which is discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6, aimed both to explore attendees’ knowledge of the “online world” and to also give them confidence in supporting young people who might be disclosing problems they are facing related to online harms. During this training, there is a focus upon moving away from the technology, focussing on behaviours and bringing in fundamental safeguarding practices such as disclosure and support. One of the key messages delivered is bringing objectivity to safeguarding judgements. In general, attendees were very much in agreement about this approach. However, as we will discuss in later chapters, while it might seem like a simple concept to deliver in a training setting, it seems far more difficult to bring to practice.

This book considers the state of online safeguarding through the lens of a five-year youth mental health project, established in 2016, called Headstart Kernow.¹ However, this is not an exploration of the Headstart Kernow project per se, more an exploration of online safeguarding and tensions between policy, adultist views and the youth voice. We make use of the extensive research in the project as vehicle for this exploration. We will, throughout this book, present a youth voice that, in contrast to the views of many professionals and policy makers, does not ask for prevention or prohibition from online harms, but understanding and support when things go wrong. It poses a fundamental question:

How can professionals best respond to young people who disclose they are victims of online harm?

There is a supplementary, but equally important question, particularly given the discussions around online safeguarding policy in Chapter 2:

How can we provide young people with a safe, supportive environment so that they are confident that they can disclose that they are a victim of online harm, and know they will get support?

¹ <https://www.headstartkernow.org.uk/>. Accessed August 2021.

We will explore in depth our discussions with young people of the duration of this project in subsequent chapters and what arose from these conversations—a key issue that repeatedly emerged was what we might refer to as *digital value bias*, where professionals will bring views about the safeguarding in a particular scenario, or a general view, that is underpinned not by professional training and objective reasoning, but opinion informed without authoritative source and conjecture. The quotation at the start of this chapter is a good illustration of this. The teacher was clearly uncomfortable with “age inappropriate” games and talked about the violent and sexual nature of some of the games the student played. It was their view that this was not acceptable, and young people under aged should not be playing them. This is a view that is entirely acceptable and one with which we do not particularly take issue. It is their opinion and that is to be expected. However, claiming a causation without evidence is something with which we would disagree. Yet this is something we have observed repeatedly through our project work, and also in our wider working practices.

One young person (aged 17) we spoke to during the project stated clearly:

I don't listen to adults when it comes to this sort of thing.

When asked why they felt this, they said firstly adults tend not to understand online issues and, because they do not have similar online experiences to young people, they tend to overreact to situations and instead of providing support, make things worse.

Another was a discussion early in the project with a headteacher at a school in Cornwall demonstrated that perhaps this young person was correct to feel this way. They were asked what their incident response process is for dealing with a “sexting incident”—a typical situation being where a young person has self-produced an intimate image of themselves and then sent it to some who has non-consensually shared it further. Again paraphrasing, the response from the head was:

We usually get the DSL to give them the hairdryer treatment first, so they don't do it again, then we see what we can do to help

This is an issue that we will develop in Chapter 2 and return to in Chapter 6, because sexting does present professionals with a challenge

given the criminal nature of the act of a young person self-producing an intimate image and the need to, in the view of many professionals, prevent young people from doing this.

Which brings us to the other recurrent theme, that of the *online white knight*—adults who see it as their role to eliminate harm, or the risk of harm, with young people’s interactions online. They wish to keep them safe online, and therefore, they must eliminate the risk of harm. They need to *prevent* harm. As we will discuss during this book, this is an attitude we have encountered with many professionals. Their intention is worthy and admirable. It is also, for reasons we will explore later, a pipe dream.

THE HEADSTART KERNOW PROJECT

The project was a partnership programme to develop resilience and mental wellbeing in young people in Cornwall that was led by Cornwall Council and funded by the Big Lottery. The project’s stated aim was to adopt a “trauma-informed” approach to children’s mental health support in the county that was²:

- *focused on young people aged 10–16 as evidence clearly demonstrates that half of diagnosed lifetime mental ill-health cases begin before the age of 14, and 75% before the age of 18;*
- *co-produced with young people who inform and influence it and are key stakeholders;*
- *universal, and about prevention with targeted support;*
- *a ‘Test and Learn’ programme;*
- *striving to achieve system change;*
- *doing things differently—we embrace new and innovative ways of thinking and working and people are at the forefront of what we do.*

From the early stages of the project, a youth voice was considered a fundamental aspect. The project made it clear that the starting point should be listening to young people and helping them consider the resilience and

² <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/mental-health/help-me-feel-mentally-stronger/>. Accessed August 2021.

mental health challenges they face. A young people's council was established to inform the project from proposal to strategy to delivery. From those early stages of the project, a number of clear messages from young people were communicated:

- *We want to be able to understand our own thoughts and emotions and can talk openly when we need help.*
- *People around us need to know the signs and know what to do when we are struggling.*
- *Help must be reliable and consistent; we will know who we can trust to help us to help ourselves.*
- *We are helped to cope with the pressures of life, including online.*
- *We learn and share what we have learnt.*

And what was clear from these early discussions with young people, online pressures are real and present in their lives. It was equally clear, therefore, that online had to be part of the project.

The Headstart Kernow project itself was underpinned by the seminal work of Bronfenbrenner and his ecological framework of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In Bronfenbrenner's framework, he described different systems they operate around a child that has direct or indirect influence upon them. Simply expressed, these are:

- **Microsystem**—The child's immediate environment, such as home, family and close friends.
- **Exosystem**—People and places that have an indirect impact on the child's life, such as their wider community, formal and informal education settings, social care, healthcare settings, etc.
- **Macrosystem**—Government policies and cultural values, including laws, social values and economic drivers.
- **Chronosystem**—The influence of change and constancy in a child's environment, acknowledging that the child's environment, and influences, will change over time.
- **Mesosystem**—Different parts of the child's immediate environment interacting together.

This ecosystem of interconnections facilitates the development of the child and highlights the different, and equally important, roles players in the system have. A critical aspect to note about this ecosystem is that it clearly shows that there is no one independent entity that ensures positive development of the child at the exclusion of others. It is an ecosystem of cooperative individuals and organisations and the interactions between them that results in healthy development. Perhaps most importantly in his model, and perhaps lacking when we consider online safeguarding, was the importance of mesosystems—the interactions between the different players in child development.

A YOUTH VOICE AND A REFOCUSING OF THE DISCOURSE

While there were many activities within the Headstart Kernow project, we will focus on the work around what was referred to as the “Digital Resilience workpackage”. This was established to develop a youth-led strategy around how online technology impacts upon young people’s wellbeing and to develop strategies to better inform professionals about how they might be supported. We wanted to do something different from the typical “online safety” approach, which is to develop resources, whether these be videos, lesson plans or documents that “help” young people think about their behaviour online and conduct it in a safer manner.

Within this book, we will use the findings of the workpackage as the vehicle to explore challenges in child online safeguarding and why/how we need to bring more of a youth voice to the discourse.

Alongside our experiences within the Headstart Kernow project, we also draw upon previous experiences as an academic and a youth worker with, collectively, over thirty years’ experience speaking to young people about these sorts of issues. As such, the discussions are driven from an ethnographic, as well as empirical, perspective and we will incorporate a lot of personal narrative. Given the participatory nature of both our roles in the Headstart Kernow project (one as the lead for the digital resilience workpackage and the other as the facilitator of the digital research strategy), and our wider work with young people, it would be disingenuous to present this analysis without a reflexive perspective.

This is not, like much research into child online safeguarding, an objective survey-based method. While these are entirely appropriate for this area, and works such as the EU Kids Online project (Livingstone et al.,

2011) have been instrumental in informing policy, this is not our chosen approach. As we will discuss in early chapters, we started from a position of not knowing the relationship between emotional wellbeing and online behaviours affecting young people. Therefore, it seemed that the most appropriate approach was to ask young people directly, build our understanding, and then consider potential interventions. In adopting an immersive approach alongside aims to strongly represent the youth voice, we hoped to move conversations away from prevention to support and empowerment, for both young people themselves and also stakeholders in their safeguarding.

The chapters in the book are broken down to firstly define the project aims against the context of online safeguarding policy and then explore how we came to the outcomes we achieved. Particular to this exploration was a tool that we developed what become known as the Headstart Kernow Online Resilience Tool (Headstart Kernow, n.d.), a resource developed for those working in the children's workforce to assess behaviours disclosed by young people, and the associated risk, and included in this book as an appendix. While the tool is a core outcome from the project, it is not the concluding part of this book—the development of the tool is a fundamental part of the exploration of youth voice in online safeguarding, and it is a means to an end rather than an endpoint of itself. What will become clear through this exploration is that while the tool, and subsequent training developed within the project, provided us with a tangible output to attempt to start addressing culture change in online safeguarding, it is, as with any resource, not going to change culture of itself.

In presenting this research, findings and evaluation of impacts, the book is broken down into five main chapters, along with final conclusions.

In Chapter 2, we introduce the overall aims of the Headstart Kernow project, the challenges presented with aligning online behaviours with the chosen approach and the broader fit with the online safeguarding context. While this has been introduced above, we will explore in more detail in this chapter.

Chapter 3 develops these findings against a wider, personal, exploration of prior experiences working with young people and the challenges faced by professionals in talking about online issues with them. This chapter develops themes from discussed above and in Chapter 2, but introduces more explicitly a differentiation between safety and resilience explaining why, even though it is not without its challenges, taking a resilience-based

perspective, informed by a professional understanding of risk and harm reduction, is more inclusive than preventative discourses.

In Chapter 4, we present the foundational work, which was formed of semi-structured discussions with a range of young people to gain better understanding of their views, concerns and wishes around online safeguarding. These discussions helped us better understand the tension between preventative agendas and how these were at odds with young people and, in some cases, became barriers between them and those with safeguarding responsibilities.

Chapter 5 discusses the development of the Online Resilience Tool in more detail but always keeping a broader view around why the tool was developed how it was, and how young people were included in its development. Again, we illustrate that the inclusion of youth voice in the development of these sort of resources continues to challenge value biases and assumed harms.

Chapter 6 explores the impact of the tool and how it has been used to change attitudes towards online safeguarding through the use of resilience discourse and providing professionals with a practical tool to challenge their prejudices. It also reflects at length about experiences in training and working with professionals, and how we can slowly move towards a victim centric and less knee-jerk response to online safeguarding disclosures. However, it also discusses how difficult some of these deeply held beliefs are to challenge.

Finally, in Chapter 7, we bring the discussion to a close with further reflections on how we can move conversations around online safeguarding forward by adopting an approach that is underpinned by youth voice and supports stakeholders in safeguarding. It also reflects upon changes that have occurred in the wider online safeguarding world since the development of the tool—namely COVID lockdowns and the Everyone’s Invited website of disclosures of youth sexual harassment and abuse—to consider how the lessons learned in the Headstart Kernow project might reach a broader audience.

REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press (ISBN 0-674-22457-4).
- Headstart Kernow. (n.d.). *Headstart online resilience tool*. <https://www.headstartkernow.org.uk/digital-resilience/>. Accessed August 2021.
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., & Ólafsson, K. (2011). EU kids online. *Final Project Report*.