CHAPTER 7

Moving the Conversation On

Abstract The findings of the Headstart Kernow project have illustrated that there is still a gulf between the intentions of adults with safeguarding responsibilities and their good intentions, and the impact of these upon the young people they wish to support. A key finding in the project is the lack of formal training among professionals and how the resultant knowledge gaps are filled with digital value bias, drawn mainly from professional's own use of digital technology and opinions drawn from media reporting and peers. The COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns, has further illustrated that with a lack of evidence conjecture becomes fact and reinforces the findings of the Headstart Kernow research further.

Keywords COVID-19 · Digital value bias · Digital white knight · Everyone's Invited · Critical thinking

In conclusion, we draw this book to a close with a reflection of the findings of the Headstart project against the policy direction explored at the start and show that these findings do little to support such a prohibitive approach. We have seen, throughout the discussions in this book, a need from those we, as stakeholders in online safeguarding, wish to protect, that the "traditional" approaches to online safety are not working, and

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rather than having a population of young people confident that they can disclose to any stakeholder and gain support, there are many who would rather try to sort thing out themselves, or suffer in silence, for fear that disclosure will result in chastisement or making matters worse. Young people certainly believe that there is a relationship between digital technology and their wellbeing but, equally, they do not believe the elimination of online harms is an achievable goal.

In drawing our discussions to a close, we will reflect upon two recent issues related to online safeguarding that further illustrate the points we are making, before considering the role of all stakeholders in online safeguarding, and what professionals can do to more effectively support young people in their care.

COVID-19 and Lockdown

Obviously, over the last two years, we have been experiencing young people engaging with their education online, and being subject to COVID-19-related lockdowns. While the broader safeguarding issues around this are beyond the scope of this book, there is one recurring issue that is very much related to our discussions. In April 2020, the NSPCC published an article NSPCC (2020) on their website stating:

> Lonely children are twice as likely to be groomed online.

And within the article there was a:

> Heightened risk of sexual abuse during coronavirus lockdown… The NCA knows from online chats that offenders are discussing opportunities to abuse children during the crisis and Europol has seen a surge in attempts by offenders to contact young people on social media.

What followed was a range of online safeguarding organisations and law enforcement agencies all coming out with similar messages. For example, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF, 2020) raised concerns that:

> There are warnings that, with schools being forced to shut, there is an **increased risk** of children being groomed and coerced online.

The National Crime Agency (NCA, 2020) raised concerns that:

> But the NCA also knows from online chat that offenders are **discussing opportunities** to abuse children during the Covid 19 crisis.

Interpol followed with a similar report (Interpol, 2020) which stated:

> Boredom **may** lead to increased risk-taking, including an increase in the taking and sharing of self-generated material.

And even UNICEF put out an alert (UNICEF, 2020)

> In South Africa, the current lockdown **may** put children's privacy in danger as they spend more time online.

Clearly, if one applies a knee-jerk reaction to lockdowns, it makes sense. Young people are locked down and online more; therefore, they are more at risk of grooming and abuse. However, it became apparent that when these reports were investigated in more detail, there was little evidence to support the claims, just suggested, as highlighted above, that it might be the case. For example, the Interpol report provided evidence that there was greater activity in the exchange of child abuse imagery during lockdowns, including the availability of self-produced material. However, it provided no evidence of increased reporting of grooming by young people or their families.

As we discussed in Chapter 6, these sort of safeguarding alerts tend to trigger reactions across the safeguarding profession, and these claims quickly became established as fact. We were told that children were more at risk during lockdown, and parents needed to monitor online access to ensure they were safe. However, when we explore that data on this, there is little evidence this was actually the case. In work still ongoing, we served a Freedom of Information request on all local authorities asking for a week on week breakdown of safeguarding disclosures received, with a separate breakdown for online abuse if possible. While the work is ongoing, we publish a brief report on initial findings in Phippen and Bada (2020). Furthermore, almost all local authorities replied to state they have no statutory requirement to categorise online abuse separately, and therefore, they do not, which begs the question—where is the evidence for this conjecture? We acknowledge that the Child Exploitation and

Online Protection Command (CEOP[1]), as the national organisation to report online abuse, might have experienced an increase and, as they are not subject to Freedom of Information, this is different to determine. However, they have not reported an increase in disclosures, and the NCA reporting stated:

> Since schools closed because of coronavirus the number of child safety concerns reported through the CEOP website has stayed largely the same.

Discussions with teaching staff with whom we have a relationship as a result of the Headstart Kernow work further confirm this—they have not experienced an increase in safeguarding disclosures as a result of lockdowns. While there has been a change in the nature of disclosures, the most serious that have been dealt with related to intra-familial domestic abuse. There has certainly not, in their view, been an increase in online harms as a result of these lockdowns. As one young person pointed out when we asked them about it, they are spending up to eight hours a day online for college work, they need a break from it after that and they are unlikely to then spend the evening, in their words "chatting to pedos".

This is certainly a clear example of the need for evidence to make informed and responsible alerts. Saying "children *may* be at increased risk" does little but create moral panic.

Everyone's Invited

The other recent phenomenon worthy of comment is the emergence of the Everyone's Invited website[2] and subsequent policy response, which both provides further evidence of the unwillingness of young people to disclose abuse and the failure of some very senior professionals to be informed by evidence.

The website, established by a victim of sexual abuse in their school, provides the means for survivors of abuse, who have been subjected to abuse by peers, to anonymously disclose what happened to them. These testimonies are then posted on the website. Since its establishment in June 2020, the website now hosts over 51,000 testimonials (at the time

[1] https://www.ceop.police.uk/. Accessed August 2021.

[2] https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/. Accessed August 2021.

of writing, that is certainly going to increase by the time of publication). The testimonies detail a breadth of abuse by peers, including a great deal of image based and online abuse. An examination of the testimonies shows, once again, that many survivors felt there was no point in disclosing because they would not be taken seriously, they believed/had been told what they had done was illegal, or, in the case of many who did disclose, they were told to not tell tales or simply "ignore" the abuse.

It is an evidence base that provides a great deal of validation to the data collected in this project. However, it is also the impact of the website on national policy that again illustrates the response by professionals. As a result of the volume of disclosures, and the nature of these, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, tasked the regulator, OFSTED, with an investigation of schools and colleges to determine prevalence of abuse. The report by OFSTED (2021) made it very clear this is extremely common, and in all of the schools they visited (32 in total), there were young people who disclosed abuse. The subsequent reporting in BBC News (Wills & Sellgren, 2021) reported on the "shocked" by those at a national policy level:

> Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman said she was "shocked" that young people said it was a significant problem at every school the watchdog visited.

And Gavin Williamson said Ofsted's review had "rightly highlighted where we can take specific and urgent action to address sexual abuse in education".

Our concern is the level of shock by those who form national policy related to these issues. Speaking for ourselves, and having discussed with others, both academic and professional, there is no one who actually speaks regularly to young people who is "shocked" or surprised by the findings. We are further alarmed because the literature has existed for a long period of time to report on these sorts of abuses in school settings. Ringrose et al. (2012) produced an excellent qualitative study almost ten years ago that highlighted these issues. Furthermore, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee conducted an inquiry into these issues in 2016, and many of us provided evidence for this. The published report (Women & Equalities Committee, 2016) made it very clear that the evidence showed this was prevalent in schools and made a number of recommendations that, while falling on deaf ears at the time,

are very similar to those suggested by OFSTED in their 2021 report. Put simply, anyone working in this area should not be shocked by the findings of the 2021 study because the evidence base has shown this for a long time. It is their lack of knowledge about the evidence base that is shocking.

The Ecology of Childhood and Online Safeguarding

Returning the Bronfenbrenner's ecology of child development, as discussed in Chapter 2, we have shown throughout this book that it is the failures of stakeholders that result in poor outcomes for young people disclosing (or not disclosing) online abuse. As we have discussed above, the focus for most online safeguarding policy is prevention, generally through technical intervention by a single stakeholder (technology providers). With other stakeholders, assuming "someone else" is dealing with the issue; rather than focussing on their own professional development, we end up with a prohibitive discourse that is failing young people.

Research by Bond and Phippen (2019) developed the Bronfenbrenner ecology to the online world. By adapting this ecosystem for online safeguarding, it provides an illustration of the importance of stakeholder interaction and the breadth of stakeholder responsibilities for online safeguarding (Fig. 7.1).

The value of the model is that it shows many different stakeholders in online safeguarding and shows the importance of interactions (mesosystems) between them, as well as the distance a given stakeholder is from the child we wish to safeguard. It allows us to clearly see that this is not something that can be tackled by digital platforms, or a teacher at a school, without input from other stakeholders with safeguarding responsibilities.

From the broad online safeguarding, we need to ensure we do not lose focus on the roles in the microsystem, or the fact that encompassing all of this—the macrosystem—should be the rights of the child.

Within this model, the importance of rights is defined, with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as the fundamental macrosystem around while the entire stakeholder space in enveloped. While this should be any safeguarding professional's go-to for the development of new resources, teaching, technologies, policy or legislation, this seems to be the most neglected, and often ignore, aspect of online child safeguarding.

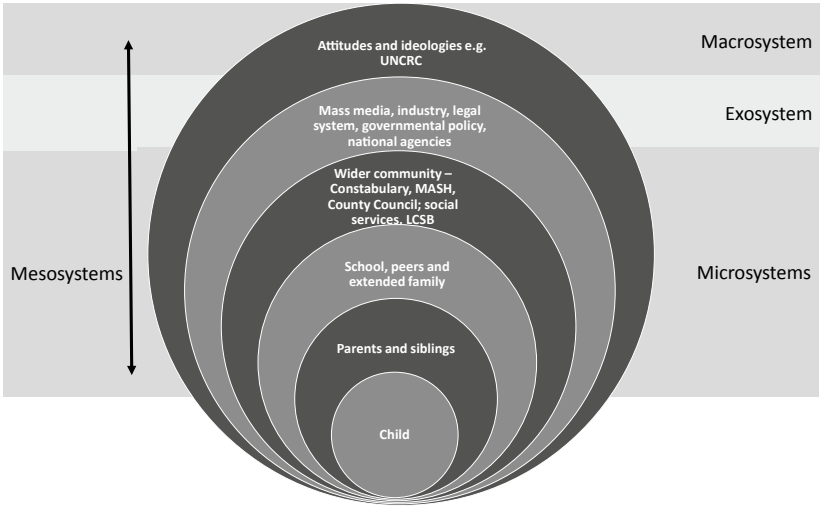

Fig. 7.1 A stakeholder model for child online safety

Arguably, it is sometimes viewed as a barrier for solutions, rather than the foundation of any legislative or policy development.

The findings of the Headstart Kernow digital resilience workpackage highlights the important of an integrated stakeholder approach to online safeguarding. The evidence from the project strongly supports the need for critical thinking by adults, supported with resource, so that they can help young people navigate the online world, rather than thinking they have all of the answers or need to stop them doing anything dangerous. Returning to the fundamental issues discussed with young people, as well as not being effective, prohibitive approaches create barriers between young people and those with caring responsibilities.

Young people need to be able to take risks online, in order to build resilience. But those risks need to be mitigated with support, and the knowledge that they can speak to adults about concerns they have, rather than shutting down for fear of being told off. Young people have told us throughout the project that they want to have conversations, they want to ask questions, and they would like those questions to be answered. However, they do not expect professionals to know it all, and "ill find that out for you" is a reasonable response in their view.

One of the most encouraging things to come out of the project is that there are a number of schools and colleges that are *confident in their lack of knowledge* to contact us should a safeguarding alert arise or a student discloses something they do not recognise. This is a significant step forward and reflects the importance of communication between stakeholders within the ecological model. The mesosystems are a crucial part of online safeguarding, there is no one stakeholder that can resolve every disclosure or, regardless of legislative intention, prevent all online harms. And while we are often able to help schools and colleges who are reaching out, equally if we do not have the answer, we can use our own networks to resolve issues. Working together is far more effective that trying to solve everything oneself for fear of admission that perhaps one does not have all of the answers.

In conclusion, we would make the following recommendations for all professionals working with children and young people:

When it comes to online safeguarding, prohibition is not the solution. You cannot make a child safe online; however, you can help them build resilience and understand the risks faced going online.

Work at your digital value bias. We all bring our own experiences to our professional work environment, whether this is through personal experiences, or as a parent. It is important to be mindful of these, and to challenge them when making safeguarding judgements. While we might believe a young person has been irresponsible in taking an intimate image and sending it to a partner, the fact is, from a safeguarding scenario the only thing upon which to focus is "how can I help this young person who has disclose upset or harm". Telling them that you do not believe they should have do something in the first place will not help.

Don't be a digital white knight. A professional does not have to have all of the answers, or protect every young person in their care from the potential for any harm online. Just as young people experience harm and abuse offline, they will also experience it online. We can work with them to recognise the risks and mitigate them. And, if they do experience harm, they need to be confident they can disclose and get support.

Most importantly, professionals need to understand that they do not have to have all of the answers, and the most crucial part of the safeguarding response is to listen to young people. We have shown throughout the project that young people want to talk about their own lives, and they have many questions. "Don't do it" is not an answer they want to hear.

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