Friends, Peers and Safeguarding

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Friendship, and wider peer relationships, contribute to young people's sense of safety and wellbeing (Blakemore, 2018; Cossar et al., 2013; Foshee, et al., 2014; Roesch-Marsh & Edmonds, 2021). Moreover, during adolescence the significance and influence of young people's peer relationships has been found to intensify in many countries around the world (Blakemore, 2018; Coleman, 2011). Nevertheless, recognising this has failed to ensure that child protection or wider safeguarding systems and interventions take account of young people's friendships or wider peer relationships when supporting those affected by violence and abuse. On the contrary there is evidence that many social work responses disregard peers, while centring family relationships, in their efforts to safeguard young people (Rogowski, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Firmin, 2019, 2020; Bracewell, 2020). Such an absence is notable given the role of friendship, and wider peer relationships, in young people's exposure to risk as well as protection.

Multiple studies have found that young people are more, or as likely, to disclose concerns about abuse to their peers than their parents or other adults (Cossar et al. 2013; Allnock and Atkinson, 2019; Brennan and McElvaney, 2020, Barter 2017). More broadly, positive attitudes can be reinforced through peer relationships. Peer influence can support pro-social behaviours and beliefs, such as healthy living (e.g. healthy eating and avoiding drugs and alcohol), equality, anti-discrimination and ambition (Laursen, 2018; Veenstra et al., 2018). In recognition of this, prevention programmes aimed at reducing rates of bullying, intimate partner violence and sexual harassment in schools have commonly sought to create opportunities for 'bystander' interventions, peer mentoring and buddying schemes, in which supportive and protective peer cultures are utilised and nurtured (Foshee et al., 2014;

Banyard et al., 2020). Peer relationships also provide wider opportunities and contexts for pro-social activities and skill-building (Krasnor and Ramey, 2018; Veenstra et al., 2018).

However, as already identified, peers can also be a source of harm. These harms can be perpetrated on and offline and can include a wide range of activities such as bullying, criminal and sexual exploitation, and physical and sexual abuse. Peer-victimisation is reported to be global problem impacting the welfare of significant numbers of young people around the world (UNICEF, 2019, 2020). In the year ending March 2018 the crime survey for England and Wales estimated that 4.4% of children aged 10 to 15 years (423,000) were a victim of violent crime in the previous 12 months (Office for National Statistics, 2018). For young people who participated in the survey, 92% knew the person who had instigated violence against them. In 86% of cases, they attended school together, and for 13% the instigator was identified as a friend (including boyfriend or girlfriend).

In this special issue we present papers from Australia, China, Europe, Ghana, and North America, which consider the role(s) of friendships and wider peer relationships. Despite their geographical spread, this body of work features numerous shared messages about the opportunities and challenges that come with considering peers in both informal and formal protective responses to young people in need of support and/or protection. They also point to the definitional, methodological, policy and practice gaps that warrant attention, for friendships and peer relationships to be sufficiently considered within child protection and wider safeguarding systems.

Friends? Peers? Why definition matters

The papers in this special issue consider the role of both friendship, and wider peer support networks and relationships, in safeguarding young people. The terms friend and peer have distinct but interrelated meanings which have implications for research and practice (Roesch-Marsh & Emond 2021). Most of the papers contained in this issue illustrate that the different meanings these terms hold for young people and practitioners matter. For

example, in the paper from Ghana young people spoke about friends as important people who you have fun with but not necessarily someone to share difficulties with, such as dealing with parental mental health. The voluntary and informal nature of friendship means that young people are often left to deal with these issues alone. As authors Warrington et al. from the UK found in their exploration of friendship and peer support following sexual abuse, the support of friends can be vital for some but the sensitivity and understanding of friends can be variable and unreliable. In contrast, Cody et al. focused on structured peer support for young survivors of sexual violence across Europe and North America, defining peer support as 'support provided by those with similar experiences'. This formalised peer support system was viewed as an additional or alternative support provision to that of informal friendship networks and ensured that peer supporters receive appropriate training and help.

In trying to understand these relationships a useful starting point is to consider why does the relationship exist in the first place? Three broad categories of peer relationships can be identified across the featured papers. Firstly, most young people's friendships and peer relationships exist outside of formal support structures and are not primarily related to safeguarding or protection, as with the example from Roesch-Marsh et al. in Scotland, they are centred around the search for belonging and happiness. Young people choose to engage in these relationships and can, in the absence of coercion and abuse, choose to leave them, and this was noted by multiple authors. In some situations, friendships denote a caring investment, one in which young people are intrinsically there for each other, not out of a sense of duty or formality but because they like each other; and this in turn can foster trust and informal opportunities for support in times of need. The different quality and context of peer friendships meant that the support provided was also often distinct from that provided by parents, caregivers or professionals, as Warrington et al. writing in a UK context explained:

The unique nature of support from friends was described variably but primarily presented as something with potential to feel less emotionally charged, pressured or judgemental.

However, multiple papers also noted the precarity of friendship, and the specific risks that were posed when introducing 'taboo' or 'stressful' issues into a friendship where a shared experience or understanding of harm is not the foundation upon which that relationship was built. Writing about this issue in Ghana, Cudjoe et al. noted the challenges of maintaining friendships for young people whose parents were experiencing mental ill-health:

> . . . children commonly think that once their peers get to know about their parent's mental illness, they may cease to enjoy activities together. Therefore, it is important to keep silent about their parents' mental illness when around their peers to continue enjoying relationships with them.

Likewise, in studies from the UK Daw et al. identified that young people can feel 'helpless' and 'fearful' when their friends seek support around domestic abuse, and Warrington et al. found that precarious peer cultures were not always suitable for providing support in the aftermath of sexual violence.

The challenges associated with accessing support through informal friendships appeared to be mitigated, at least to some extent, in more formal peer support structures. A study across Europe and North America found that shared peer experiences of sexual violence created a context conducive with peer support groups. Having shared experiences facilitated peer support that was relatable, credible and translatable, where young people were not judged (or fearful of judgement) when turning to peers for support. Similarly, in Ghana it was recommended that young people who shared a traumatic experience could be better placed to support one another and be less likely to bullying or judge.

A third type of peer-relationship was explored by Zhu in China. In this scenario young people were not supported through existing friendships or organised around a shared experience of harm/abuse, but within schools through peer mentoring systems. In this form

of peer support younger pupils are matched with older young people who can then support them with the aim of reducing school bullying. However, the author notes that these hierarchical peer relationships might themselves feature power imbalances, with an age-gap introducing the potential for exploitation and bullying. Reflecting other conclusions in this special issue, they point to the importance of education and practical support for young people who are positioned as mechanisms for peer-support (be that formal or informal) to ensure that these relationships do not feel burdensome to the young people providing the support and that any help they offer is protective.

Clear definitions are therefore crucial. Peer support through existing friendships, shared interest or experience groups or through a shared context all present unique challenges and opportunities, and consequently the type of relationship being studied requires careful consideration.

Why consider peer relationships and friendships within safeguarding work?

What young people want from their friendships, and from wider peer support networks, appears multi-faceted. Understanding, and support without being judged, seems critical. As one young person from the paper by Daw et al. explains:

> The best thing that I did was to be there for her [friend]. Not try and pressure her into breaking up with him, because that's, kind of, being just as bad as him, but, like, to just be emotionally there for her and make sure you're there to comfort her whenever she's down (Young person 13-16)

At first glance such a request appears relatively feasible. However, the collection of arguments made across this special issue highlight a range of considerations that would need to be addressed before this request can be met. The articles in this issues suggest that a non-judgemental approach is most reliable when coming from formal peer-support structures, rather than informal friendship networks. The fear of shame, or being misunderstood, was mitigated either through shared experiences within the formal peer

relationships in question, or through formal training and advice or professional support structures that equipped peers to be understanding and supportive.

The experience of meeting others who have had a similar experience and are further along in healing and coming to terms with their experience, can be very powerful. As a professional respondent from Cody et al.'s peer mentor study explained:

> When the survivor [peer mentor] goes out and meets them, and they're able to see that their story is similar to theirs, and that they have been able to triumph in their own ways, it really creates the sense of hope for them. (Professional respondent 1, Organisation A)

Cody et al. stress, however, that supporting and training these peer mentors requires time and resources and is not a cheap alternative to professional support.

While acknowledging the unique value of formal peer support, articles in this issue also show that some young people seem to highly value the informality that came with support from friends. Moreover, various authors noted that support from friends was important due to their temporal proximity to young people during adolescence. Young people are with friends during the day at school, and in various out-of-school settings, creating numerous opportunities for support (Zhu). Such support included being a point of disclosure, providing comfort or emotional support, or acting as a conduit to professional support (Warrington et al.). However, for young people to provide this type and level of support they require practical advice from adults; and to an extent this again introduced a level of formality. Taken collectively the contributions in this special issue suggests a balance needs to be struck; and that both formal and informal pathways of support (likely across a continuum) are required. However, none of the contributions were able to clearly articulate what such a continuum might entail, as each focused on a single element.   Nevertheless, this provides an important starting point to consider how this continuum might be

conceptualised and provides a basis to understand how a young person's peer support needs might best be met.

Challenges of considering peer relationships and friendships within safeguarding work

Recommendations to introduce elements of formality into friendship-support mechanisms largely stems from the identified challenges of integrating peer relationships into child protection and wider safeguarding practices.   Young people reported concerns about how to maintain friendships while they were also experiencing safeguarding issues (Daw et al.). Seeking support from friends could result in bullying or isolation, when young people failed to understand how to support each other or judged friends negatively due to what they had experienced (Cudjoe et al.).

Friendships during adolescence are also dynamic; changing frequently and with this comes a level of precarity. Reaching out to people who may not remain your friends over an extended period of time could be perceived as a risky endeavour. Consequently, young people surveyed in Australia stated that they were most likely to disclose abuse to their mother (about concerning behaviour of an adult – 68.7%; or a peer – 63.1%) followed by a friend (64.4%; 57.9%) (Russell et al.). Thus, family relationships remain very important and we should not assume that peers are always the first choice, or indeed best placed, to respond to young people who require support.

Finally, there is a risk that some young people will feel (or be) burdened when supporting their friends or peers. Authors noted a need to mitigate any 'responsibilisation' that might be an unintended consequence of providing young people with the skills and formal space to support each other with experiences of abuse (Daw et al.). For example, when young people were asked about the possibility of being approached by friends who were experiencing domestic abuse, they reported being concerned that they would feel fearful and helpless. As such, all young people require a certain level of practical advice about the nature of abuse (in all its forms), how it impacts young people and what they can

do if a friend approaches them for help. Such advice shouldn't suggest that it is the young persons' responsibility to prevent or disrupt harm; but instead ensure they are equipped to respond effectively if situations arise where their friends need support, including where they could go to seek more formal assistance.

All the above challenges appeared particularly pronounced in situations of informal peer support, particularly support within existing friendships. Whereas formal peer support structures, particularly for young people who had experienced issues such as sexual abuse, were designed to ensure young people were assisted to support each other and involved young people who all had similar experiences of abuse and therefore reduced the risk of being judged or misunderstood.

<u>Where next: Research, policy and practice conundrums</u>

The stories told in this special issue suggest not only that young people's friendships and peer relationships could play a role in safeguarding responses – but that they already do through both informal and formal routes. Nonetheless, far more work is required to understand the dynamics of this support, and the best ways to maximise its potential and minimise its risks.

There are methodological challenges and shortfalls with work completed to date. For the most part, researchers rely on gatekeeping organisations to speak to young people about their experiences of peer or friendship-based support, and access to such organisations varies. In most countries featured in this special issue, the role(s) of peers have not been fully considered in practice or policy development, as such the forms of peer support identified sit beyond formal response systems. Arguably, greater recognition by, and integration into, wider organisational responses to violence and abuse, would provide the practical mechanisms required to safely maximise the potential for peer support.

While the papers in this special issue draw upon experiences from a number of countries there remain gaps that warrant attention. Firstly, it appears that gender may impact

on the accessibility and availability of support from peers and friends. For example, girls and young women surveyed in Australia were more likely to seek support from peers than from boys and young men (Russell et al.). Do we understand these gender differences, and are they reflected for various forms of harm and in different countries? More broadly, an intersectional account of friendship and peer support in safeguarding is required. How do the opportunities and concerns raised in this editorial vary in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, ability and so on? Moreover, what avenues of support do online peer relationships, through for example social media platforms, provide for support and how and in what ways do these online peer dynamics reflect or differ from those factors outlined in the current papers and for whom? The papers in this special issue provide a foundation for raising these important questions; although further research is required to answer them and of course this requires research funding bodies to recognise this as a central aspect of safeguarding for young people.

We would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this special issue, we believe it brings together a wealth of knowledge but also raises challenging questions for both practice and policy development on how we can best support young people who are at risk of or are currently experiencing harm. In terms of this special issue two key considerations are established – and we hope that these are taken into account in the design of future research. Firstly, that definitions matter. Work is required to explore support via various peer relationships; pre-existing friendships, specialist peer support groups, and temporally or physically proximal support structures (in schools for example); and clarity is needed as to what type of peer relationships are under study on each occasion. Secondly, developing a continuum of formal and informal support to characterise the ways that peer relationships/friendships can be integrated into safeguarding practice/policy might also provide a route for clarifying the types of interventions under study and their implications for service development. Formal peer support structures, that exist outside of young people's established friendships, offer specific benefits and require specific scaffolding; these

requirements are different for informal support via pre-existing friendship. Questions might also be asked about what happens in the middle, where friendships form within formalised circles of support; friendships that may persist beyond a peer support intervention.

For practitioners the greatest challenges seem to relate to the informal supports provided by friends, which are often hidden from view but can be the first line of defence for so many young people experiencing harm. We hope reading these articles will deepen understanding and respect for the immense value and importance of these relationships in young people's lives. For, as one young man explained in Warrington's study:

> *"Like my best friend…He's always there day and night. I can ring him at three o'clock in the morning and he'll answer the phone…He's very understanding, and he seems to say the right stuff."* (Interview 6, male, 21 years)

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