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Risk, Rights, Resilience & Relationships: redesigning our approach to safeguarding adolescents into adulthood

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Though (appropriately) far from practice, even the most strategically oriented political leader exercises considerable influence on safeguarding practice.

They do so by:

- setting the tone of the system overall

- setting the standards for practice

- setting an example to colleagues and partners.

› Relationship with officers - High support, high challenge, high expectations

› Credibility and humility (modelling the best of practice and leadership)

It's about relationships

To develop normally, a child* requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child.

*Somebody's got to be crazy about the kid.
That's number one.*

First, last, and always.

*person!

(Bronfenbrenner, 1971)

› Adolescent agency in relation to risks makes adolescents 'imperfect victims' and makes addressing those risks (and their impact) a complex business. (Rees and Stein, 1999)

› working within a child protection system that is designed primarily to meet the needs of younger children maltreated within the family (Bilston, 2006)

› *Local political colleagues are key – they need to understand the complexity*
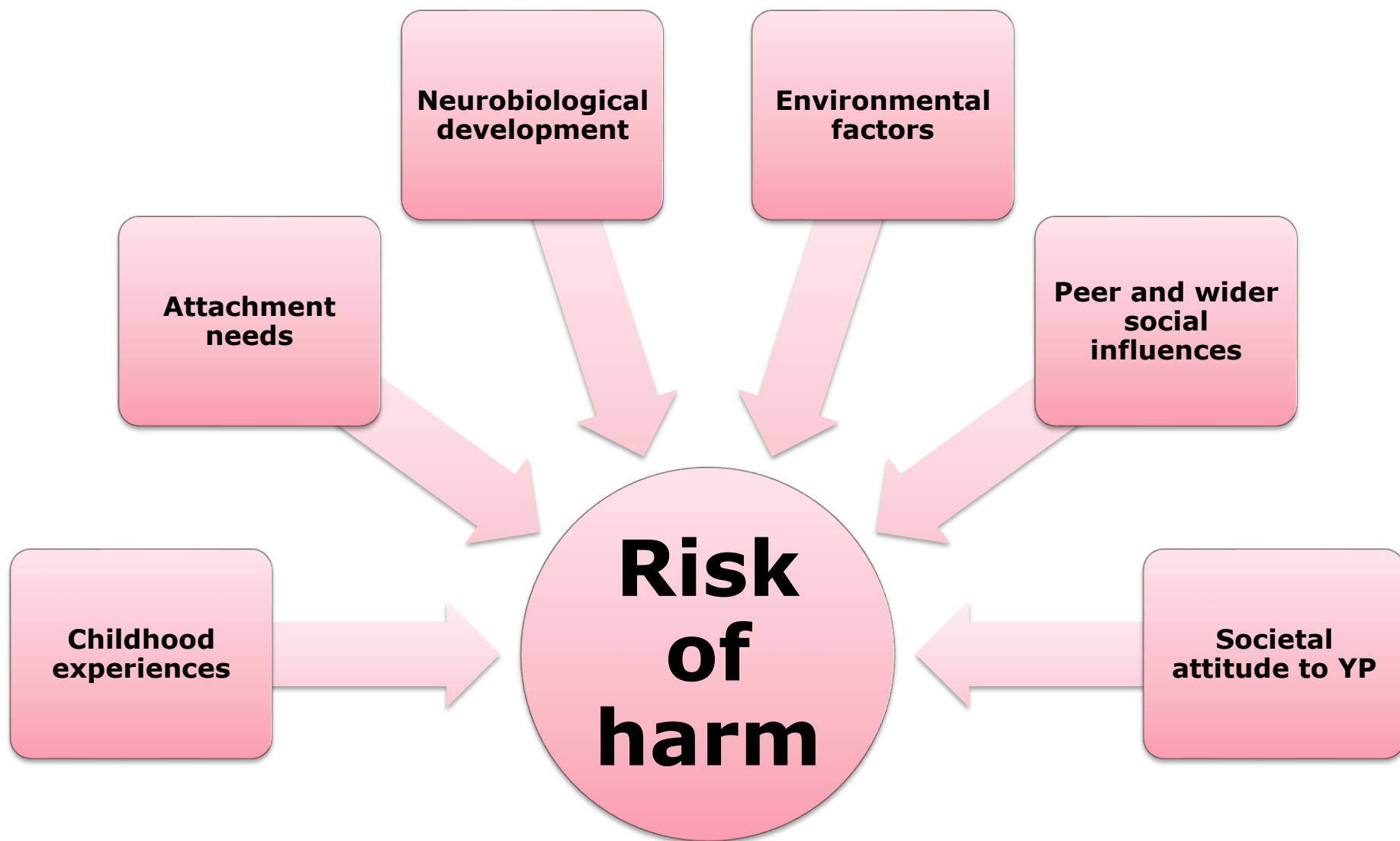
Adolescent 'choices' and 'risk-taking' behaviours

› Young people's 'risk-taking' - underpinned by *interacting* biological, social, environmental and neurobiological changes (Calkins, 2010)

› Risk can be positive (Coleman, 2014)

› Adapted to harms experienced in earlier childhood

› Unmet needs - seek to meet via risky routes

› Misinterpreted as rational informed adult 'lifestyle choices' → Victims being denied appropriate support / permission to give up

› Conversely, professionals can minimise adolescent choice and agency

› ***How do you show your officers you understand this nuance?***

The case for change

(Holmes, 2021)

› Adolescents may have **distinct** safeguarding needs - often 'contextual' / extra-familial and underpinned by complex social and biological drivers

› **Harm and its effects** do not abruptly end at 18; **the brain** may continue developing until mid-20s...(Sawyer *et al,* 2018); Prior *et al,* 2011) but support may stop at 18

› People don't fit into neat boxes! Different types of harm; vulnerability / resilience are situational and dynamic

› **Transition** to adulthood is process not an event, we may need care and support without having Care & Support needs™.

› Promoting **resilience** and dynamic **developmental** needs

› There are **moral** and **economic** drivers for a reimagined safeguarding system which is contextual, transitional and relational

› **Boundary-spanning**: practice, policy, mindset... and politicians!

Systems leadership and boundary-spanning

> Boundary-spanning - the practices of *'reaching across borders, margins, or sections to build relationships, interconnections and interdependencies in order to manage complex problems'* (Williams, 2002)

> *systems leadership is characterised by two key attributes: it is a* **collective** *form of leadership, … 'leadership as participation' rather than 'leadership as performance' … the concerted effort of many people working together at different places in the system and at different levels, rather than of single leaders acting unilaterally. Secondly, systems leadership* **crosses boundaries***, both physical and virtual, existing simultaneously in multiple dimensions. It therefore extends individual leaders well beyond the usual limits of their formal responsibilities and authority.* (Ghate, Lewis & Welbourn, 2013)

> ***What helps you to be a boundary-spanning systems leader?***

Protection *and* preparedness

> I was in care all my life and you did keep me really safe. You wrapped me up tight in bubble wrap... but I'm 19 now and I kind of feel like I can't move my arms

(Max, care-experienced young adult)

> Now I've left care I get really lonely. That's a big thing for my safety I think, but no one talks about it as safeguarding. Unless you're worried about my child, I won't hear from you [children's services] again.
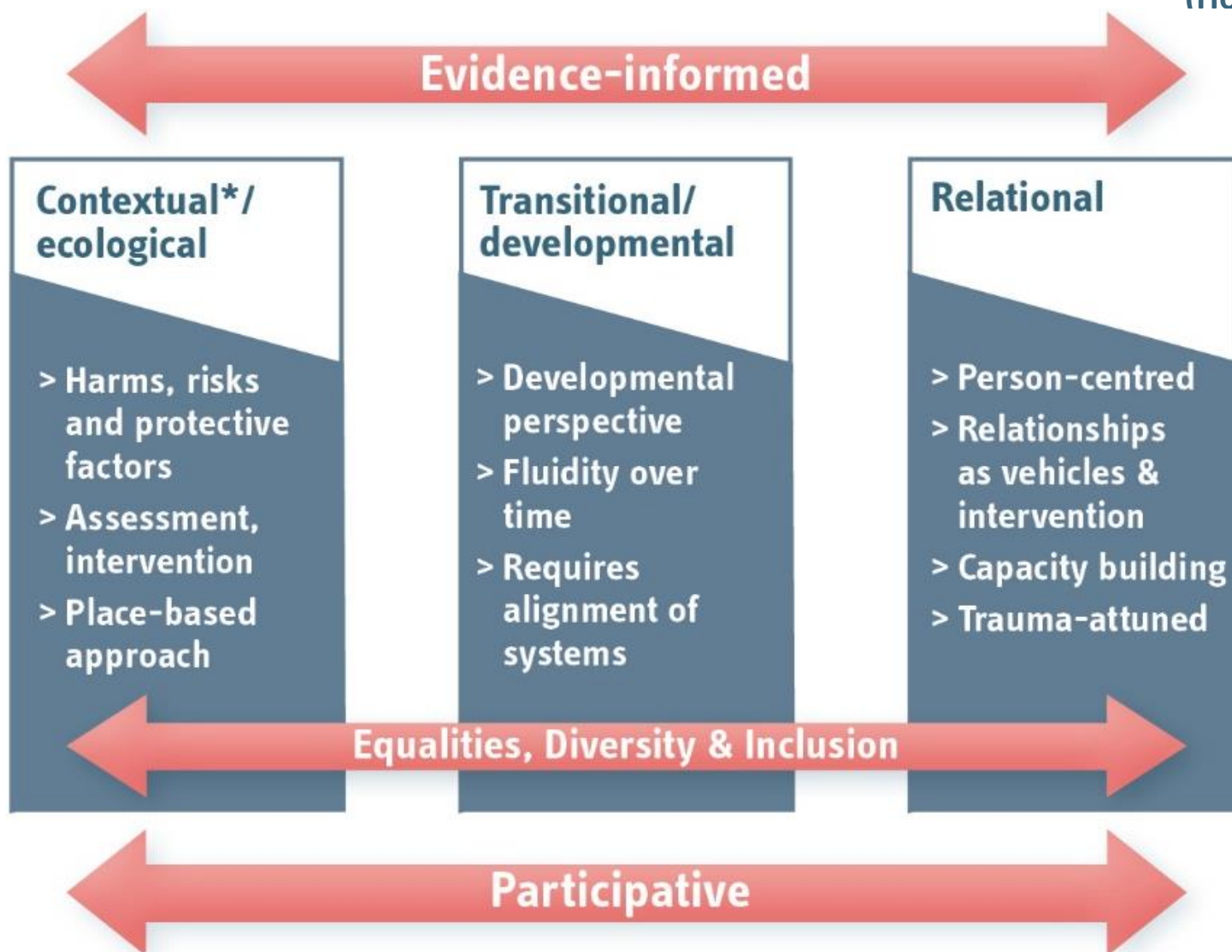
(Aisha, care-experienced young adult)

> I couldn't wait to get to 18, I thought that once I was an adult everything would change. It hasn't worked out that way. I really wish I was a kid again so that you could lock me up.

(Kelly, young adult)
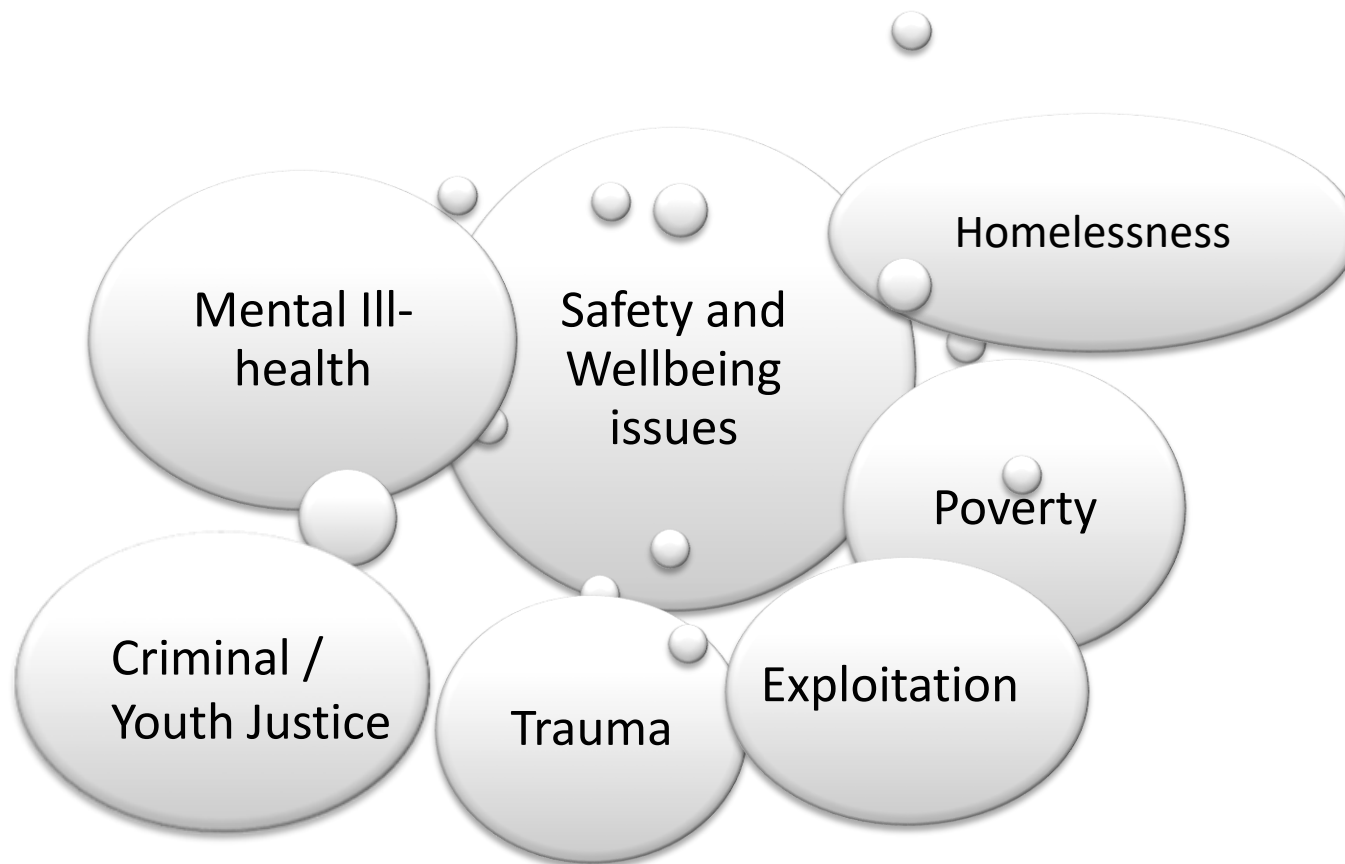
Key Principles of Transitional Safeguarding
(Holmes, 2021)

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Evidence-informed

Contextual*/ ecological
> Harms, risks and protective factors
> Assessment, intervention
> Place-based approach

Transitional/ developmental
> Developmental perspective
> Fluidity over time
> Requires alignment of systems

Relational
> Person-centred
> Relationships as vehicles & intervention
> Capacity building
> Trauma-attuned

Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion

Participative

See Firmin's work:
www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

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Interconnected issues require an integrated response

Mental Ill-health

Safety and Wellbeing issues

Homelessness

Poverty

Criminal / Youth Justice

Trauma

Exploitation

Interconnectedness of harms and adversities requires a highly integrated system of support, whereby attention is paid to childhood/adolescent experiences. Commissioning may be a key lever for change

Thinking critically about complexity
(learning from CSE)

- Simplistic 'risk indicators' are problematic (Brown, 2016; 2017)

- › **Self-efficacy** is commonly associated with **resilience**, so young people MUST be safeguarded in a way that empowers them – as much voice and choice as possible

- › **Protection and participation** (UNCRC) 'Both/and not either/or' (Lefevre *et al*, 2019)

- Data is part of the solution BUT needs to be sophisticated, ethical

- Beware unintended consequences – eg focus on 'gangs'

- Trauma-informed is not just 'doing ACEs' (EIF, 2020)

- Lived experience: ethical, robust, representative, purposeful

- Action plans are not the actual work…

Thinking critically about parallel processes

› Collaborative problem solving or problem displacement?

› What behaviours get rewarded?

› Everybody's business? Or everybody's *busyness*?

› Coherence: whole child, whole system

Team around child/family

Local Safeguarding Partnership/s

Place-based leadership
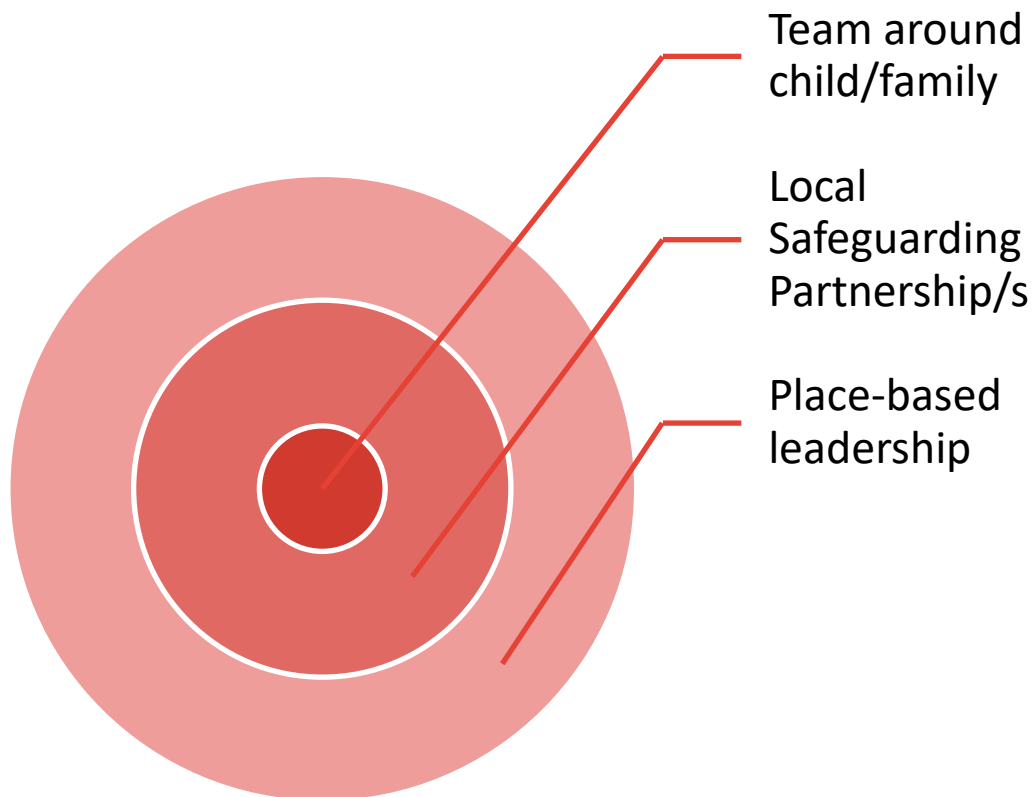
Are you modelling the kind of behaviours you want to see in practice?

Money matters

› The economic context makes innovation as difficult as it is essential

› The current approach isn't great value…

› Investing in preventative and recovery-oriented work to promote people's safety and wellbeing can play an important role in avoiding the costs of later intervention

› Evidence from the UK and international contexts suggests that failing to help young people recover from harm and trauma can mean that problems persist and/or worsen in adulthood, creating higher costs for the public purse. (Chowdry and Fitzsimons, 2016; Kezelman *et al*, 2015)

› The system (and the spend) is connected… Maternal wellbeing (SM, MH) and CP/care; care and criminal justice; mental health needs, costs Vs funding; family relationships and homelessness; domestic abuse and community violence etc

What's helping local areas make the change

› Clear, credible, explicitly owned local leadership of the agenda

› Role-model critical thinking

› Expansive definition of 'partnership' – communities are included

› 'A system not a service'

› Active knowledge and skills exchange (Cocker et al, 2021)

› Culture of innovation ('the soft stuff is the hard stuff')

› Practice informed strategy

› Collective, place-based problem solving (rather than problem displacement)

› Building the local case – data, inc people's lived experience

From the top with feeling

› Resilient, safe, healthy, empowered young people… need resilient, safe, healthy, empowered practitioners (and managers!)

› If we want evidence-informed, child-centred, ethical and ambitious practice… we need evidence-informed, child-centred, ethical and ambitious leadership

› Tick-box scrutiny and governance drives tick-box practice

Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another, it is the only means.
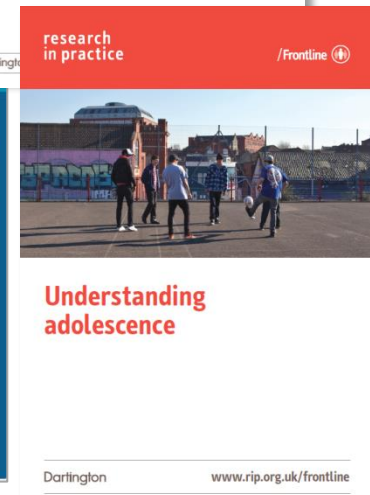
Albert Einstein

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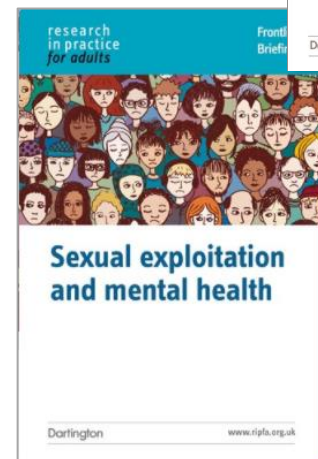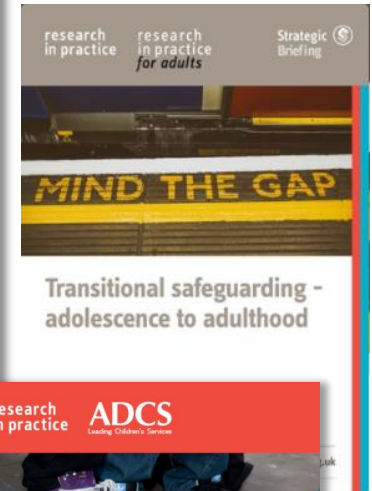**Young person-centred approaches in child sexual exploitation (CSE)**
– promoting participation and building self-efficacy
Dartington · www.rip.org.uk

Transitional safeguarding – adolescence to adulthood

That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence
Dr Elly Hanson and Dez Holmes

www www.researchinpractice.org.uk

✉ ask@researchinpractice.org.uk

🐦 @researchIP

Sexual exploitation and mental health
Dartington · www.ripfa.org.uk

Understanding adolescence
Dartington · www.rip.org.uk/frontline

Thank you

› Transitional Safeguarding (2018) original briefing: https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/publications/2018/august/transitional-safeguarding-adolescence-to-adulthood-strategic-briefing-2018/

› The role of adult social work & adult safeguarding to the Transitional Safeguarding agenda (2021): https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/5420/67346_dhsc_trans-safe-report_bridging-the-gap_web.pdf

› The relationship between Contextual Safeguarding, Complex Safeguarding and Transitional Safeguarding (2019): https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2019/january/safeguarding-during-adolescence-the-relationship-between-contextual-safeguarding-complex-safeguarding-and-transitional-safeguarding-2019/

› Systems leadership: https://thestaffcollege.uk/staff-college-research/systems-leadership-research/

Some questions we might ponder…

› How do our established approaches to scrutiny and accountability reflect (or not) the complexity and nuance of the work with young people?

› How can political leaders model a YP-centred approach to practice and strategy?

› How can Lead Members for children exercise boundary-spanning influence? What structures help you, and what hinders you?

› How do political leaders experience (and/or contribute to) the emotion that plays out in the system?