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# That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence

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## Foreword

This piece of work, exploring the research and practice evidence around adolescence and risk, was instigated by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) Families, Children and Young People Committee in the spring of 2014. It reflects a growing sense from the sector that the current child protection system is not working effectively enough for many adolescents. As with the work undertaken by ADCS in 2013, 'What is Care For?', this work aims to challenge our thinking and encourage us to focus on *what we know* rather than continue to be constrained by the systems we have.

The evidence scope draws on research evidence relating to adolescent risk, the causes and impacts of these risks, what is known to be effective in addressing these risks, and adolescent development. It also draws on knowledge from the sector, using practice examples to illustrate how the research can be implemented. This work is timely in that it reflects the increase in policy attention on the risks facing young people and resonates with the aims of the Department for Education's innovation fund. It also chimes with the recent Health Select Committee's report on mental health provision for children and young people, the forthcoming framework from Public Health England and the recent reviews of the sector's response to child sexual exploitation.

It is right we acknowledge that there are far too many young people who are not having their needs met by services and far too many examples of young people not being supported to avoid, reduce and recover from risks they face. Nonetheless, a more complex narrative is presented here than simply asserting that services are failing young people; the response to our call for practice demonstrates that a range of excellent, bold and creative service provision exists at a local level. However, this evidence scope argues that these services and the pockets of excellent practice exist *in spite* of the system rather than being enabled by it.

There is a wealth of talent and knowledge across partner agencies, and within young people and their families, that must be galvanised and used to create a more sophisticated model of risk prevention and protection. This paper offers seven principles that can be used to underpin service-level and system-wide approaches, which are inter-connected and build upon existing principles of effective practice.

There are, of course, limitations to this scope. It is not a systematic review of all relevant research, nor does it offer an exhaustive list of recommendations and, as with any effort to synthesise a large body of knowledge, there is the risk that some of the subtleties may be lost in translation.

Lastly, we wish to extend our profound gratitude to those local areas who submitted practice examples and the numerous colleagues who helped to refine the scope by reviewing early drafts and participating in feedback workshops. This support has been invaluable and demonstrates that the sector is absolutely committed to continuously improving the way in which we protect young people and improve their lives

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**Note:** The references are collated on a separate document and can be found **here**.

## 1 Introduction

### Background and context

It is now widely acknowledged that, as a nation, we do not adequately understand, identify, prevent or effectively reduce the significant risks that some adolescents experience (ADCS, 2013). Yet this is despite the many promising practices that are making a difference in local areas around the country, examples of which are drawn upon in this scope.

Several criticisms of the current system have been made, and often by those working directly within it.

*When resources are strained, adolescents' needs are frequently deprioritised in favour of those of younger children.*

(Gorin and Jobe, 2013)

In part, this may reflect faulty assumptions that adolescents, because of their age, are more 'resilient' than younger children (despite having experienced more cumulative harm – see for example Stanley, 2011, in relation to domestic abuse), and that some of the risks they encounter are the result of their own choices – choices that are assumed to be freely made, informed and adult-equivalent. Adolescent agency in relation to risks makes adolescents 'imperfect victims' (Rees and Stein, 1999) and makes addressing those risks (and their impact) a complex business. This is made more difficult still by working within a child protection system that is designed primarily to meet the needs of younger children maltreated within the family (Bilston, 2006).

Local authority spending to protect adolescents from serious risks is also skewed towards solutions that involve the care system. Approximately 50 per cent of children's services spending goes on care placements (Audit Commission, 2014). Care placements for adolescents are the most expensive and make up 30 per cent of the care budget (DfE, 2013a). Trends indicate that the number of young people in care (especially welfare secure and specialist residential care) is increasing, with some local areas reporting an increase in 16 and 17-year-olds becoming looked after (Brooks and Brocklehurst, 2014). Although many placements are effective at reducing risk, the finding that looked after children are disproportionately caught up in the

most serious risks – for example, sexual exploitation, violence and running away (eg DfE, 2013b) – suggest that care solutions are not sufficiently effective on a national level. In a recent discussion paper on the use of care with adolescents ADfCS (2013, p8) conclude that '*a significant amount of residential care would be de-commissioned if it were judged more carefully on outcomes.*'

This growing sense that the current system of protection and risk reduction is not effective enough for many young people is accompanied by an increase in our knowledge and understanding about adolescent development and the specific risks they face. Research offers insights on physiological development, with adolescence now recognised as the fastest changing period of development aside from infancy (Coleman, 2011). Research also provides clear evidence of the powerful and central role that relationships play in adolescent well-being (WHO, 2014). This evidence converges with key policy drivers, such as foregrounding the young person's perspective and experience of service intervention (for example, Munro 2011), and working preventatively with young people in order to support well-being (PHE, in press).

If this understanding about adolescent development and the distinctive risks that young people face is not applied consistently across policy and practice, a range of consequences is likely:

- > missed opportunities to work as a team *with the adolescent* and often *their family* in combatting risk
- > misunderstandings about the fundamental drivers and contexts of risk, with the result that resources are channeled to the wrong places (eg risk is assumed to be within the adult world rather than the peer group) (Firmin, 2013)
- > harmful assumptions made about adolescent choice (on the one hand choices are minimised, and on the other they are perceived as adult 'lifestyle choices')
- > a failure to recognise (and therefore address) the challenges involved in preventing and reducing adolescent risk (eg the frequent challenge to engage young people in interventions).

The result is that young people can be left to experience harmful risks without adequate help or are offered help that is too heavy-handed or comes too late. This not only fails young people but also racks up costs for society over both the short and longer term. In their review of a sample of local approaches to diverting young people from care, Ofsted (2011) found that all areas demonstrated savings arising from young people not entering care. These ranged from £93,000 savings for one family alone, to £688,000 in total for a children's services budget. Similarly, an evaluation of the impact of Intensive Intervention Projects – designed to 'turn around' the lives of the most challenging and troubled young people – found that the IIPs '*generated average savings from prevented expenditure over five years with an average present value of about £280,000 per person ... With a return of £8 of savings per £1 spent, these figures indicate significant quantifiable cost-benefits from the intervention*' (Flint et al, 2011).

### **Aims**

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore key dimensions to adolescent risk and resilience (including the ways in which choice and behaviour can play a role in both) and consider the implications of all of this for current practice and service design. The wealth of evidence we now have to draw upon arguably invites a paradigm shift in how we, as a whole society, perceive young people and the risks they face. Applying this understanding to policies and practice with at-risk young people will require innovation and leadership. In parallel, smaller and immediate changes that make day-to-day practice more 'young person friendly' can achieve lasting positive impact in the lives of young people and be the route to more fundamental change.

So this paper aims to stimulate thinking about how local practice with adolescents can be improved. Principles and examples of potentially effective practice are offered with this in mind (see, in particular, Sections 8 and 9) – not as a limiting list, but as ideas to prompt further thinking about what might work in local contexts. (This briefing is also accompanied by a separate Appendix of Practice Examples.)

### **Definitions and terminology**

We use the following definitions of developmental periods (whilst recognising that there is no absolute consensus on age cut-offs between different life stages, and that such demarcations can be unhelpful when applied too prescriptively):

'*Children*' refers to individuals between 0 and 17 years of age; '*young people*' to those roughly between 11 and 20 years; and '*adolescents*' to those roughly between 10 and 18. '*Early adolescence*' is seen as the period between 10 and 13 years of age; '*mid-adolescence*' between 13 and 16 years; and '*late adolescence*' from 16 into the final teen years. '*Parents*' is used as shorthand to include also carers and parental figures.

We use the term '*risk*' to refer specifically to the experience of a significant adversity or abuse that would typically incur the attention of children's services (ie a child being at risk of significant harm) and/or would seriously threaten the adolescent's life or health (whilst recognising again that other definitions of risk exist which may be more useful in different contexts – for example, risk as the *likelihood* of experiencing such adversity, or risk as the experience of *a wider range* of adversities including such things as poor education and poverty, involvement in minor crime, and mental health problems). We also recognise that '*risk-taking*' can often serve a number of positive functions.

Mental health problems are discussed here insofar as they contribute to, or are a consequence of, the adversity or risks discussed. We have chosen our focus to ensure that the discussion does not become unwieldy and to avoid duplication with other complementary activity that focuses on this wider range of adversities and difficulties – for example, Public Health England is soon to publish a public health framework for improving young people's health and well-being (PHE, in press) which addresses several of the health-related issues.

## 2 The key significant risks adolescents face

From a global perspective, the UK can be seen as a relatively safe place for the average child to grow up. Indeed, some risks towards adolescents have been shown to be decreasing (eg substance misuse: HSCIC, 2013). Nonetheless, evidence suggests a high proportion of adolescents in the UK today still face one or more serious risks. A number of these are outlined in Table 1. It is worth noting that many can be a cause of further risk, as well as a response to or result of previous risks in the young person's life (we discuss this later).

The table is also designed to illustrate how, if we wanted to categorise these risks within the current child protection framework, we would have to expand the definitions of the current child protection categories *and* create new categories (we discuss this below).

Child protection category within which risks fit, or are closest to	Some of the risks adolescents face in the UK (often distinctive within adolescence, either in prevalence or impact)
<b>Sexual abuse</b>	Sexual exploitation by gangs or groups Sexual abuse by peers Duress / coercion to sexually exploit / abuse others Online sexual abuse Intrafamilial sexual abuse Sexual abuse by those in positions of trust or authority
<b>Physical abuse</b>	Family violence – adult(s) to adolescent Mutual family violence between adult(s) and adolescent(s) Gang-related and community violence Violence from relationship partner
<b>Neglect</b>	Neglect from family members including rejection and abandonment, and parental mental health or substance misuse problems that disrupt parenting capacity and incur caring responsibilities on part of the young person Overly restrictive parenting Neglect in custody <sup>1</sup>
<b>Emotional abuse</b>	Emotional abuse from family members towards adolescents Emotional abuse between family members and adolescent Extensive bullying by peers and/or online Exposure to other risks listed above and below Living with domestic abuse between parents Emotional abuse from relationship partner
<b>None of the above</b>	Homelessness Self-harm including deliberate self-harm, suicide attempts, eating disorders Gang involvement Substance misuse

**Table 1** Serious risks facing adolescents in the UK today (by closest child protection categories)

<sup>1</sup> Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs. In young offender institutions, arguably children are not looked after by a parent or parental agent who aims to meet the child's basic psychological needs (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2010). This is in stark contrast to homes with authoritative parenting and also to residential care homes underpinned by a caring ethos. (See section 4 for further discussion of the extent and impact of this.)

The nature and prevalence of some of these risks are explored here in order to enrich the picture – both through insights into specific risks, as well as general themes that cut across them. Vulnerabilities, causal pathways and protective factors are considered in later sections, which seek to make sense of risk and develop principles for effective prevention and response.

### *Neglect of adolescents by family members*

Researchers have recently argued that parental neglect is particularly poorly identified and addressed when adolescents are its victims (Rees et al, 2010). This may be partly because it is more difficult to define than the neglect of younger children. Adolescence is a time of developing autonomy and there is great variability in the speed at which different individuals develop the propensities and skills involved in greater independence. This means that whether parental behaviour constitutes neglect or not will, in many cases, depend on the individual adolescent's development. So for instance, some 16-year-olds may desire and be skilled enough to live independently whereas others may not; therefore insisting that one's child lives independently may be neglectful in the second instance but not in the first.

It is also normal for developing independence in adolescence to involve some heightened conflict with parents and some rejection of parental rules and care (Collins and Laursen, 2004). In this context, non-neglectful parenting may need to be particularly resourceful and persistent (such as proactively impeding a child from running away), whilst neglectful parenting can appear to conform with the adolescent's own wishes. An additional layer of complexity comes in the form of cultural norms and expectations, which vary widely in relation to the roles of young people and their parents. What is deemed appropriate parenting in one culture may be overly restrictive in another to the point where it is neglectful of the adolescent's needs to develop social skills and greater autonomy (Rees et al, 2010).

Given that adolescents have very different parenting needs to those of younger children, some have argued that adolescent neglect requires its own definition (Rees et al, 2010). Indeed, to use a single definition that does not recognise the complexities of adolescent neglect might risk minimising both its existence and the harm it causes. Adolescents exposed to the same parenting omissions as younger children are assumed to be more resilient due to their developing skills (Rees et al, 2010), but this can prevent the distinctive features of neglectful parenting of adolescents being identified and addressed. An example is the potentially greater prevalence of acts of *commission* in adolescent neglect (versus that of younger children), such as coercing one's child to leave home. Parental unwillingness to house young people is the foremost reason for youth homelessness (Homeless Link, 2014).

So lack of clarity about adolescent neglect and assumed resilience impede its identification (in a vicious spiral), even though research suggests it may be a significant problem. Neglect is the most commonly used category on child protection plans for children aged 10 to 15 (as is also the case for younger children) (DfE, 2014). In serious case reviews (SCRs), neglect features more prominently for 11 to 15-year-olds than for any other age group (Brandon et al, 2013) and one study of seven youth suicides resulting in SCRs found that neglect and rejection were prominent in all of the young people's histories (Brandon et al, 2014). In the most recent prevalence study of child maltreatment in the UK (for the NSPCC – Radford et al, 2011) 0.4% of 11 to 17-year-olds reported experiencing neglect from their parents within the past year. This figure is likely to be an underestimate due to the methodology employed<sup>2</sup>, but even so indicates that large numbers of adolescents experience neglect.

<sup>2</sup> In this study, parents were likely to be close by when adolescents completed the computerised questionnaire (and so participants may have felt constrained in what they could report).

### *Homelessness and running away*

As highlighted above, the primary reason young people become homeless is parental unwillingness to accommodate them, which is often linked to family conflict and breakdown. Other primary reasons include escaping from abuse and domestic violence, absconding from care placements, or previous places to live no longer being available after a period in custody (Homeless Link, 2014). Encouragingly, Homeless Link has recently reported an increase in joint working between housing and children's services departments and that, potentially as a result of this and the Southwark Judgement in 2009, few 16 and 17-year-olds who sought help from their local authority had slept rough (Homeless Link, 2014).

There are more findings specific to children and young people who run away than to those who are homeless (these are two overlapping groups), and research suggests those who run away are at a significantly high risk of harm. Running away is likely to be preceded by exposure to harm, and may well involve harmful and risky experiences beyond the instability and stress inherent to running away. Most children who run away are adolescents. The Children's Society found that during their experience of running away, 26 per cent were either hurt, slept rough (or at the home of someone they have just met), or stole and/or begged in order to survive (Rees, 2011). Twelve per cent of young people seen by services supporting young runaways had experienced child sexual exploitation (Smeaton, 2013). Over 70 per cent of children who run away are not reported as missing to the police and only 5 per cent actively seek help from services while away from home (Rees, 2011). As a result, official 'missing' data only capture the 'tip of the iceberg', leaving the risks involved in running away largely hidden and unaddressed. Furthermore, recording systems between police and children's services can differ (although work is underway to address this), which makes understanding the scale of the problem even more difficult.

### *Sexual abuse by gangs and groups*

There is growing awareness across the UK of the problem of child sexual exploitation (CSE) involving gangs and groups. CSE is a form of sexual abuse where there are particular dynamics around the exchange of sex for other things (such as money, food or affection) in the context of a power dynamic (DCSF, 2009). It is a form of sexual abuse particularly targeted towards adolescents, perhaps in part because their developing agency may make them less vulnerable to other forms of coercion and manipulation in sexual abuse, whilst at the same time making them more vulnerable to grooming processes in which abusers deceptively construct a connection between sex and sought-after love, affection or status. A variety of types of gangs and groups are involved in perpetrating CSE (and not all CSE is perpetrated by a gang or group) – for example peer-led gangs versus those led by adult males – and CSE has distinct strategies and 'functions' within each.

There are problems with developing a tight definition of CSE. It appears that the term is often used to describe sexual abuse towards adolescents generally, even when the abuse does not involve clear 'exchange' dynamics and would have been described as sexual abuse if it had involved younger victims. CSE also appears to be used often as shorthand for sexual abuse involving gangs and groups.

An inquiry by the Office of the Children's Commissioner into CSE in gangs and groups reported 2,409 confirmed victims (over a 14-month period), with additional data indicating many more at risk (Berelowitz et al, 2012). The mean age of reported victims was 15, and 28 per cent were from black and ethnic minority (BME) backgrounds. Pearce (2014, p130) notes that '*even with inadequate data-recording systems, evidence of widespread abuse through CSE [in gangs and groups] exists, with young people in their teens being most at risk*'.



### *Intrafamilial sexual abuse*

In the 2011 NSPCC prevalence study (Radford et al, 2011) one per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds reported sexual abuse perpetrated by a parent or guardian in their childhood. However, we do not know what percentage of this group experienced it in adolescence, nor how many experienced other forms of intrafamilial sexual abuse. This is important because other research indicates that sibling sexual abuse may be the most common form of sexual abuse (for a research summary see Stathopoulos, 2012) and that it has high levels of associated harm (Cyr et al, 2002).

Research exploring the childhood experiences of adults with symptoms of mental ill health indicates that prolonged (often intrafamilial) sexual abuse, generally starting before adolescence and persisting into it, is experienced by a significant number of people and is associated with especially high levels of psychological difficulty across the life-course (Salter, 2008). For example, Steel et al (2004) found 32 per cent of a psychiatric inpatient adult sample reported sexual abuse lasting over 10 years, with an average age of onset of eight years old. Abuse of prolonged duration is associated with complex psychological dynamics, revictimisation by others in later life, and difficulties in identification and disclosure (Loeb et al, 2011; Salter, 2008 and 2013). Although the majority of sexual abuse towards adolescents is perpetrated by those outside the family (see for example Radford et al, 2011), it should not be assumed that intrafamilial abuse is, therefore, an insignificant problem in this group – nor should it be assumed that it affects younger children only.

### *Online sexual abuse*

Sexual abuse that begins online can take a number of forms. Young people may share sexual images consensually with someone (eg a school peer) who then, without their consent, sends them on to others. In other instances, young people are deceived and groomed into forming an emotional bond with an adult online who then uses this attachment to perpetrate sexual abuse (for example, in offline meetings or through requests for sexual images) (Whittle et al, 2013a). A further type involves sexual blackmail: a person online obtains a sexual image of a young person (often via deception) which is then used to blackmail the young person into sending increasingly explicit or humiliating images (NCA, 2014).

Adolescents are more at risk of online sexual abuse than younger children. Reasons for this include their greater usage of the internet, and this usage being bound up with the increased risk-taking, impulsivity, sensation-seeking and sexual interest common to this life-stage (Livingstone et al, 2011; Whittle et al, 2013b). In the year 2012-13, more than 1,000 children contacted ChildLine about online sexual abuse; 15-year-olds were the group most likely to call about this (ChildLine, 2013). Qualitative research indicates that online sexual abuse may have particular harms associated with it, linked to the creation of images, their permanence and reach and who is viewing them, and the deception involved (Hanson, submitted). These aspects can heighten shame, anxiety, mistrust and feelings of ongoing trauma.

Further risks	Facts and figures
<b>Family violence and physical abuse</b>	<p>2.5 per cent of 11-17-year-olds report witnessing domestic violence between adults in their home in the past year; 1.2 per cent report being physically hurt by a parent or guardian in the past year (Radford et al, 2011 – these may be under-estimates due to the methodological factors noted in the footnote earlier).</p> <p>Adolescents are more likely to witness domestic violence than younger children (Meltzer et al, 2009).</p> <p>Adolescent-to-parent violence is not uncommon; despite it being widely recognised by practitioners, it is often not adequately addressed partly due to a ‘silence’ at policy level (Condry and Miles, 2012 and 2014).</p>
<b>Bullying by peers</b>	<p>Bullying is an ‘unprovoked, sustained campaign of aggression towards someone in order to hurt them for the sake of it’ (BeatBullying website). At least 20 children commit suicide each year because of bullying; many more attempt suicide or self-harm because of it (see for example <a href="http://archive.beatbullying.org/dox/resources/statistics.html">http://archive.beatbullying.org/dox/resources/statistics.html</a> and ChildLine, 2013).</p>
<b>Self-harm</b>	<p>Self-harm, defined as the deliberate self-infliction of damage to body tissue, peaks in mid-adolescence (Hagell, 2013). About 10 per cent of adolescents report having engaged in self-harm and it is more common in girls and adolescents from lower socio-economic groups (Hawton et al, 2012). Over half of young people who self-harm do so repeatedly (Madge et al, 2008).</p> <p>It is estimated that each year 25,000 adolescents present to hospitals in England and Wales because of self-harm – one of the highest rates in Europe (Wood, 2009).</p>
<b>Substance misuse</b>	<p>Despite adolescent use of alcohol and some drugs decreasing over the past decade, adolescents who do drink are more likely to get drunk and binge drink than those in many other countries. Additionally, amphetamine use is on the rise.</p> <p>Problem drug use typically occurs in conjunction with a number of other risks, such as self-harm and offending behaviour, arising out of common vulnerabilities such as a chaotic home life.</p> <p>20,032 young people received help for alcohol and drug problems in England during 2012-13.</p> <p>(Statistics drawn from HSCIC, 2013, and PHE, 2013)</p>
<b>Gang involvement</b>	<p>Up to 6% of 10-19-year-olds self-report belonging to a gang (Centre for Social Justice, 2009 (citing Sharp et al, 2006))</p> <p>Gang membership increases the risk of offending and substance misuse even when other factors are controlled for (Medina et al, 2013) – see also the discussion in section 2 on how gangs interact with normal adolescent development to increase risk.</p>
<b>Eating disorders</b>	<p>The onset of anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa typically occurs during adolescence. One in 250 females develops anorexia, and five times as many develop bulimia. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental health problem in adolescence (statistics collated by NICE, 2004).</p>

**Table 2** Key statistics on some further serious risks encountered by adolescents

### Multiple risks

**A significant minority of young people experience multiple risks, which can make it more difficult to identify causal risks and resultant risks, and can segment or silo the service response** – further challenging those working with young people. For example, Radford et al (2011) found that 10 per cent of 11 to 17-year-olds had experienced 12 or more forms of maltreatment during their lifetime (we do not know adolescent-only rates). Evidence of coalescing risks also exists in the research on vulnerability for any one risk – so for example, an adolescent is more likely to run away and experience associated harms if they are running to escape abuse; substance misuse and self-harm are often strategies used to quell distressing emotions and memories associated with previous trauma; and gang involvement may be sought to reduce the threats inherent in neighbourhood violence (Gilman et al, 2014; Tarter, 2002; Tyler and Johnson, 2006).

At both age seven and 14, children are disproportionately at risk of entering the realm of ‘polyvictimisation’ (i.e. experiencing very high levels of victimisation of different types). Adolescents who experience polyvictimisation tend to be living in (at least) one of three vulnerable contexts: a dangerous community, a dangerous family (with high levels of violence and criminality), and/or a stressed or disrupted family (due to unemployment or substance misuse, for example) (Finkelhor et al, 2009). Poverty is a salient contributor to these vulnerable contexts.

### **Impact of risks on adolescents, and unintended consequences of policy**

Over the past decade or more, there has been a focus on the impact of maltreatment experienced in the early years. One inadvertent consequence of this may have been a growing assumption that adolescence is a period of greater resilience to the impact of abuse (Gorin and Jobe, 2013). There has also been a separate (but related) move towards early intervention, based on the principle that intervening early in the life of a problem increases an intervention’s chance of success. This is a useful principle for addressing risks

facing adolescents also. However, prioritising early intervention has, at times, arguably translated into prioritising ‘early years intervention’ (Plimmer and van Poortvliet, 2012), accompanied by a related assumption that intervening at other points offers less promise.

In contrast to these assumptions, research indicates that risks experienced in adolescence may be particularly harmful and that adolescent-focused interventions can be very effective. Indeed, **adolescent maltreatment has a more global negative impact into adulthood than childhood-limited maltreatment**. A large longitudinal and controlled study by Thornberry et al (2010) found that adolescent maltreatment had a more pervasive negative impact than childhood-limited maltreatment on early adulthood outcomes (measured up to age 31). Furthermore, only adolescent (and not childhood-limited) maltreatment was significantly associated with early adulthood offending, problem alcohol use and risky sex. It also had a greater influence (than childhood-limited maltreatment) on early adulthood suicidal thinking and problem drug use. Radford et al (2011) found that polyvictimisation was associated with higher levels of trauma symptoms in 11 to 17-year-olds compared to younger age ranges.<sup>3</sup>

Other research has found *qualitative* differences in how adolescents are affected by experiencing risks when compared to younger children – in other words, the impact in many cases is not clearly lesser or greater, but *different*. For example, sexual abuse at a younger age at onset is more likely to lead to sexualised behaviour, anxiety and hyper-arousal in children (Kaplow et al, 2005; McClellan et al, 1996), whereas sexual abuse in adolescence is associated with higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and lower general psychological functioning (Ruggiero et al, 2000); this may be linked to the lower levels of support they are generally offered (Feiring et al, 1998).

Lastly, adolescents are exposed to a greater range of risks than younger children by virtue of their expanding social worlds (Rees et al, 2011) and increasing agency (discussed in next section). Risks such as gang involvement and abuse within intimate partner relationships tend to cluster within this age range.

<sup>3</sup> Polyvictimisation was defined differently according to age ranges to take account of the fact that older ages were more likely to be polyvictimised simply by virtue of their age.

### Challenges of the current system

The risks that adolescents face are particularly complex and wide-ranging (this complexity is explored further in section 3). There is also no reason to believe that they are any less harmful, on the whole, than those experienced by younger children – indeed, as we have seen, some may be more so. Yet researchers have identified a reluctance to intervene with adolescents experiencing serious risks before they reach the threshold for care. And when resources are sparse, adolescents are the first age group to be deprioritised.

**Interviewer:** OK what do you see as the biggest challenges you face in terms of providing protective services for older children?

**Social worker:** Prioritising them ... we can't rush out to a sixteen year old who's perhaps sofa-surfing and perhaps experimenting with drugs and getting into crime ... we can't prioritise that when we're working with 0 to 5 year olds in, you know, some pretty dire situations.' Gorin and Jobe (2013: p1337)

In many circumstances, the current system of services and support does not adequately recognise the range and seriousness of the risks that adolescents face. Responses are often insufficient or too heavy-handed. Some responses, such as custodial sentences, simply expose adolescents to further risk and harm (see the discussion under 'The adaptive nature of adolescent development and the risk of ensnaring' in Section 3).

One option would be to expand the definitions of existing child protection categories and/or add new categories, in order to better capture adolescent risk. However, this relatively simple response is unlikely to enhance effective prevention and intervention for a number of reasons:

- > Adding categories and dimensions while retaining the response framework creates further challenge for an already strained sector; it will not by itself increase resources and effectiveness.
- > In the context of resource pressures, this could in fact lead to negative unintended consequences – for example, prioritising adolescents at the expense of 5 to 10-year-olds.
- > Extending the child protection categories would reinforce child protection as the dominant framework for addressing risks to adolescents, yet that framework was designed primarily in response to the needs of younger children facing risks from their family. In a number of ways this makes it difficult to apply effective principles for reducing adolescent risks and harms (emerging principles for addressing adolescent risk are discussed in Section 8).
- > The child protection system typically relies on mechanisms which can alienate young people – for instance, routes to participation, such as attending child protection meetings, are intimidating (Gorin and Jobe, 2013) and may inadvertently lead to young people feeling stigmatised by their risks and problems.

**Interviewer:** Do you see child protection as always the most appropriate response for eleven to seventeen-year-old age group?

**Social worker:** No, absolutely not...because you know, teenagers will very rarely attend their own meetings, it's too intimidating for them. I mean it's horrendous to sit with your teacher and family together in a room, discussing your misdemeanours, it's not something teenagers are really interested in.

**Social worker:** I think child protection tends to be about putting controls around parents whereas when youngsters are at that sort of age they've got much more of a personal input to situations which needs to be reflected

(Gorin and Jobe, 2013: p1338)

What is clear, then, is the need for a distinct focus on adolescent risks and the resources, principles and approaches that most effectively address them. Adolescence is a time of vulnerability to particular risks (see Table 1 for examples) and adolescents have particular developing skills, propensities, adaptations, social contexts and social relationships that can feed into risks but can also provide unique opportunities to build resilience in the face of them.

Despite there being a diversity of excellent local examples of young person centred practice which actively draw on the evidence of what works when supporting young people (see Realising Ambition as an example of a programme of work that embodies this), it remains the case that *'many adolescent interventions are either downward extensions of adult programs or upward extensions of child programs'* (Thornberry et al, 2010). In terms of whole system approaches, it could be argued that the child protection system is an example of a 'upward extension' and the youth justice system still too much of an 'downward extension' (see APPGC, 2014).

### Realising Ambition

Realising Ambition is a Big Lottery Fund programme led by Catch 22 (with the Social Research Unit, Substance, and the Young Foundation as consortium partners) that aims to reduce the involvement of young people in the criminal justice system. It does this by supporting a) the replication of evidence-based interventions with young people and their families, and b) the development of evidence for promising interventions. Interventions are delivered by local organisations across the UK, and include the Strengthening Families Programme delivered by Oxford Brookes University, Roots of Empathy delivered by Action for Children, and Lions Quest Skills for Adolescents delivered by Ambition (Clubs for Young People). For more information about the programme and the interventions, as well as learning points for commissioners, see the mid-term report and its summary available here: [www.catch-22.org.uk/programmes-services/realising-ambition/](http://www.catch-22.org.uk/programmes-services/realising-ambition/)

### 3 Making sense of adolescent risks

Approaches that effectively address adolescent risks are well served by a solid understanding of the key factors underpinning those risks, as well as those that prevent risks and reduce their impact. This section argues that:

risks towards adolescents may often have more complex pathways than those facing younger children.

It explores the ways in which some risks are not simply present in the child's environment, but are created by interactions between that environment and adolescent developmental changes and tasks. It also considers how adolescent behaviour that heightens risk is often part of an adaptive response to maltreatment and adversity in earlier childhood. Based on this understanding, together with an appreciation of resilience, the section concludes by discussing some promising ways forward.

#### *Risk and adolescent development*

Adolescence is one of the most dramatic stages of life development. With the onset of puberty come bodily changes such as spurts in growth and the development of the sexual organs, as well as changes in the neurobiological system focused on emotions and social interaction. These latter changes underpin mid-adolescents' sensitivity to emotional cues (such as rewards and threats) in comparison to older and younger age ranges (Steinberg, 2010; Dreyfuss et al, 2014). In contrast, the neural systems that underlie the complex cognitive abilities involved in control and regulation develop very differently, maturing gradually over the course of adolescence and into young adulthood. This accounts for the gradual gains over these life stages in the skills comprising 'executive functioning', the control and co-ordination of thoughts and behaviours (Anderson et al, 2001; Blakemore and Choudry, 2006). Skills in this repertoire include working memory (the ability to hold information in mind and apply it to current tasks), impulse control, selective attention and planning ahead.

#### **Understanding neuropsychological development: a note of caution**

An understanding of adolescent neuropsychological development adds depth to our appreciation of how adolescents differ from children and young people in earlier and later life stages, and the distinctive pathways into the risks they face. Such an understanding also invites consideration of how adolescent behaviour serves important adaptive functions. However, in utilising neuroscience generally, it is important to avoid and challenge its misinterpretation (eg that people are 'damaged') and misuse in policy development (eg to support medical over social interventions) (see Wastell and White, 2012). The adolescent brain goes through a rapid process of developing new neural connections and this process is fundamentally shaped by social interactions and relationships – thus contributing to this life stage as one that offers a significant window of opportunity.

One consequence of the differential development of these two subsystems (early adolescent arousal of the socio-emotional system, paired with late maturation of cognitive control systems) is a period of vulnerability to risk-taking in mid-adolescence (Steinberg, 2010; Van Leijenhorst et al, 2010). This may also account for the increased emotional highs and lows that are characteristic of this period. (For further detail of the neurobiological development in adolescence see Casey et al, 2008.)

The risk-taking might involve riskily seeking rewards (for example, joy-riding or use of illegal recreational drugs) as well as riskily responding to threats (for example, responding to a verbal slur with physical violence rather than walking away). Some of the risks involved (such as those associated with physical violence) increase with the growth in physical size and strength over this period.

### ***Risk and adolescent relationships***

**Adolescence is also a time of changing social relationships. And as those working with young people know all too well, relationships are at the centre of young people's health and well-being (WHO, 2014).**

Peers become increasingly important in a number of ways – as friends, sometimes as intimate partners, and as prominent social groups in which one's identity and status are constructed and worked out. Risk-taking and the salience of the peer group interact – for example, adolescents are more likely to take risks when they are observed or interacting with peers, in a way that is not true for adults (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005). In other words, the peer group can heighten vulnerability to risk. Sensation-seeking and peer pressure influence adolescent criminal behaviour, for example, but not that of adults (Modecki, 2009), and peer-group popularity is a predictor of drug and alcohol use as well as minor offending behaviour (Allen et al, 2005).

The flipside to this is that young people may be particularly receptive to support and positive guidance from their peer group – relationships are noted as both a risk factor and a protective factor in public health discourse (see PHE, in press). The online world, too, can enhance peer influence in both directions. Moderated peer-to-peer youth forums are a good example of how the strength of peer influence can be positively harnessed (Webb et al, 2008).

#### **Examples of safe spaces for young people to receive and give support to their peers**

##### > The ChildLine Message Boards:

[www.childline.org.uk/Talk/Boards/Pages/Messageboards.aspx](http://www.childline.org.uk/Talk/Boards/Pages/Messageboards.aspx)

##### > The Site discussion boards:

<http://vbulletin.thesite.org>

##### > The Reach Out! Online Community Forum:

<http://forums.au.reachout.com>

All of these sites are moderated by trained facilitators in order to make space for positive peer support while minimising negative influence.

During adolescence, friendships typically become closer, more disclosing and more supportive, and they are critical contexts for the development of identity and social skills, which are also central features of this life-stage (Meeus, 2011; Smetana et al, 2006). Peer friendships can fulfil important attachment functions (such as providing a 'safe haven') especially when relationships with parents are less secure (Nickerson and Nagle, 2005). However, despite largely providing resilience in the face of risk, friendships can at times also increase risk – for example, by obsessively going over problems together (termed 'co-rumination'). This is a process whereby friends amplify one another's negative feelings through circular, negative discussion. Co-rumination in adolescence predicts the development of depression (Stone et al, 2011). More generally, negativity and impulsivity in friends can increase the risk of self-harm (Giletta et al, 2013).

Intimate or romantic relationships are a normative part of adolescence, their salience developing in concert with sexual interest and peer relationships more generally. By late adolescence, romantic attachments, when they are present, offer a central source of support (Smetana et al, 2006). However, earlier engagement in such relationships tends to be associated with negative factors, such as low self-esteem and substance misuse, although whether the romantic relationship is a key contributing influence is not clear (Collins, 2003). As with friendships, attachment patterns in girl-/boyfriend relationships are likely to be influenced by a child's attachment to their caregivers; however, this relationship is not straightforward (Furman et al, 2002) and adolescence is a period ripe for the development of new ways of relating to others.

Older adolescents place greater emphasis on intimacy and compatibility when choosing a partner, in comparison to early adolescents who tend to place more emphasis on partner qualities that will increase their status within their peer group. So they may be more likely to choose a partner based on their appearance, fashion style and popularity (Collins, 2003). Early adolescents are also more likely to have idealised notions of romance (Smetana et al, 2006). Perpetrators of sexual exploitation are acutely attuned into these developmental propensities, which they manipulate in order to execute abuse.

Interacting with the growing importance of peer relationships are changes in the parent-child relationship.

Parents and their parenting remain of critical importance to children's well-being and resilience during adolescence. However, parent-child conflict typically increases and cohesion, warmth and support typically decrease (Collins and Laursen, 2004). Conflict arises in part as a result of adolescents' increasing sense of agency and drive for independence.

Developing autonomy also affects the influence of parenting practices – for example, it is adolescents' willingness to disclose to their parents (enhancing parental monitoring), rather than parental attempts at monitoring alone, that reduce engagement in risky behaviours (Kerr et al, 2010). Similarly, recent research has found that young people use the internet and social media in a more useful and self-regulated fashion when their parents support their autonomy, are involved in their lives and give them unconditional positive regard, whereas monitoring and restricting their online activity appear to have converse effects (Przybylski et al, 2014). These findings are reflective more widely of the growing role of children's choice and agency during the adolescent period, and suggest different routes to managing risk than standard protection measures within the current system.

Young people's expanding social world and their developing independence both help them to build their identity, one of the central tasks of this life stage (Meeus, 2011). The construction of a coherent identity is connected to greater adolescent well-being and the development of positive personality traits, such as agreeableness. However, taking on certain identities may heighten an adolescent's experience of risk; for example, identifying with a 'troublemaker' identity contributes to sexual risk-taking, aggression and substance use (Longmore et al, 2006; Seffrin et al, 2009). As discussed further in the following paragraphs, the implication here is that services need to ensure they are supporting adolescent resilience by promoting the development of positive identities and avoiding practices and policies that support negative ones (for example, those that label young people according to risks or risky behaviour).

### ***The adaptive nature of adolescent development and the risk of 'ensnaring'***

Some features of adolescence are generally perceived by society as unfortunate, such as risk-taking and emotional reactivity. From an evolutionary perspective, however, the behaviours and proclivities of this life stage usefully work together to fulfil critical functions, most fundamentally the separation of an individual from her or his family of origin and the formation of new family ties. Risk-taking, novelty-seeking and sexual interest (often presenting as problematic) actually serve an important evolutionary function – that is, to propel adolescents away from the family circle into new social worlds wherein they seek to find a partner. During the process of transitioning from a safe environment to a novel one, the ability to detect threat (especially within social relationships) is critical and this is assisted by heightened emotional reactivity (Casey et al, 2008).

Healthy adolescent development, then, does by its very nature invite some risks. Indeed, development may be enhanced by experiencing some risks in moderation;

for example, day-to-day arguments with parents can help young people develop conflict-resolution skills and the tolerance of difference (Smetana et al, 2006).

This understanding cautions against pathologising or 'problematizing' normal adolescent behavioural and emotional tendencies. Rather, in the right context, they can be harnessed to serve young people and those around them well – for example, developing their creativity, community participation, and connection to others.

**Social pedagogy** is an increasingly influential model of working with at-risk young people. It argues that *'learning from mistakes through engaging with risks is a necessary process for children and young people and that to do so is actually a way of safeguarding'* (Research in Practice, 2014).



However, in other contexts that are less benign these same propensities and behaviours can interact in ways that lead to hurt, harm and limiting life trajectories. But if these propensities are ‘normal’ (as research would seem to suggest they are), then attention now needs to focus instead on changing those less benign contexts – that is, on making significant changes in certain societal policies that may interact with normal adolescent development to ensnare young people in more significant risks and harm. This counter-productive pattern is of particular concern where the very ‘system’ that seeks to protect is, in fact, interacting with evolutionary propensities to increase some risk. Examples are explored below.

### **1. Punitive and custodial responses to youth offending.**

The Ministry of Justice argues that one of the goals of the criminal justice system (CJS<sup>4</sup>) is safeguarding (MoJ, 2010). However, when adolescents are placed in custody, they do not necessarily receive adequate education or care (Howard League, 2010) and this constitutes a form of neglect that causes high levels of distress and mental health difficulty (Cesaroni and Peterson-Badali, 2005). This is likely to constrain adolescent skill acquisition, for example in the domains of executive functioning and social cognition (Farmer, 2011), and therefore is at odds with adolescent development. Young people may adapt to the hostility within some custodial settings by isolating themselves, becoming hyper-vigilant and using pre-emptive aggression (Gilligan, 1996; Lindquist, 2000) – strategies which, despite being adaptive in the short term, place adolescents at risk of social exclusion and further offending over the longer term.

At times, simply being caught up in the CJS may increase re-offending (McAra and McVie, 2007; Little and Sodha, 2012; Petrosino et al, 2010) by interacting with powerful developmental drivers around identity and encouraging young people to develop self-constraining identities (such as ‘bad boy’), while simultaneously inviting others to treat them as such, for example by reducing employment opportunities (labelling). However, youth offending teams are likely to be able to counteract this risk when they take a truly restorative and strengths/relationships-based approach (Byrne and Brooks, 2014).

**2. Heavy-handed responses to aggression by looked after young people.** Problematic behaviours by looked after young people disproportionately trigger responses that label, stigmatise and destabilise them, and this further compromises their life chances and well-being. Such actions include placement changes (see The Care Inquiry, 2013, for a fuller discussion about the importance of nurturing relationships in order to avoid unnecessary placement moves for looked after children and young people), forceful restraints and police involvement, all of which would be far less likely in response to the same behaviours by young people not in the care system (young people in residential care are particularly at risk – see APPGC, 2014). These responses may compound difficulties, and are in contrast to other approaches that can deal appropriately with the behaviour without inviting such risks – such as informal restorative and authoritative parenting practices.

**3. Exploitative people.** Individuals who sexually exploit young people often do so a) by taking advantage of young people’s limited knowledge of their rights and the adult world, and b) by manipulating the natural proclivities of this life stage. For example, displays of ‘worldliness’ or wealth, and dramatic promises of ideal romances, are often successful in luring adolescent girls into exploitation (eg Gohir, 2013).

Societal and cultural narratives that minimise female sexual agency at the expense of males’ are likely to make it harder to recognise and resist abuse. This means that work to tackle CSE, for example, must be underpinned by wider population-level education rather than expecting police and social care to address it alone.

This need for education-led preventative approaches is supported by findings from a survey of parents and professionals, in which 89 per cent of parents and 88 per cent of professionals agreed that secondary schools should be educating children about CSE (Pace, 2013); this throws a concerning light on the finding from the same survey that 43 per cent of teachers are not confident they could identify signs of CSE.

<sup>4</sup> This term is used to include the youth justice system (YJS).

Emerging romantic and sexual interest, risk-taking and/or the motivation to be respected by peers make some adolescent boys and girls susceptible to sharing images with strangers online, who then use these as leverage in blackmail and abuse. These same developmental drivers (as discussed above) make some adolescents more susceptible to grooming. Despite the clear protective value of parents in addressing the risk and impact of CSE, the aforementioned survey by PACE found that:

*'... parents are still being held responsible in part for the crimes committed against their child. Over two-fifths of professionals (44%) and parents (41%) agreed in most cases parents are in part responsible for the sexual exploitation of their child.'*  
(PACE, 2013: p43)

Another concern is the finding that two-fifths of teachers would not, as a matter of urgency, inform the parent of a child they thought at risk of sexual exploitation; furthermore, seven out of ten professionals and parents think that parents feel disempowered by agency involvement in the family. These findings should lead local areas to consider whether parents are being effectively engaged in identifying, preventing and addressing trauma related to CSE (for an example of service response that aims to do just that see the description of PACE's 'relational safeguarding model' and the use of family support workers in Section 9).

**4. Gangs.** Because young people are particularly sensitive to social threat, social status and their identity (compared to those older or younger than them), they may be at risk of gang involvement if they live in a neighbourhood where gangs operate and they have few other means to feel safe, develop their sense of self, and connect to peers. The (often gradual) choice to join a gang can be adaptive, but over time, gang culture, demands and warfare drive young people into blind alleys of risk (Palmer, 2009). Risks include offending and related CJS sanctions, violent victimisation including homicide, sexual abuse (perpetrators are often simultaneously victims of gang demands around hyper-masculinity – Firmin, 2013a), and longer-term consequences in adulthood such as economic hardship, poor health and family dysfunction (Augustyn et al, 2014; Gilman et al, 2013).

Responses that focus only on criminality, rather than addressing the underlying causes of gang involvement, do little to break this cycle – and may in fact serve to label young people and reinforce negative identities. These findings endorse the approach and endeavours of those local areas that are providing integrated and holistic interventions to young people at risk from gang-related activity.

*Concluding thoughts.* What we now know about adolescent development requires us, as a society, to: a) work to reduce adolescents' exposure to those risks to which they are particularly vulnerable; b) develop adolescents' resilience in the face of those risks; and c) avoid responses that are disproportionately blaming if adolescents do become entangled.

We have a responsibility to *work in partnership with young people* to create a society that offers them a 'safe course' through adolescence, rather than ensnaring them – albeit inadvertently through inappropriate service responses – in risks and harms that can have lifelong consequences.

### ***Risk and adaptation to earlier maltreatment or adversity***

The impact of prior maltreatment can lead to adolescents acting in ways that inadvertently increase risk to themselves (and in vicious spirals).

It is often the case that adaptations made in a context of maltreatment can prove maladaptive in subsequent and wider contexts. The example of CSE is used below to illustrate this principle, although it can be seen at work in numerous other adolescent risks, including gang involvement, family violence, abuse in teenage partner relationships and homelessness.

Young people who have experienced prior or current familial abuse are more at risk of sexual exploitation (Kaestle, 2012); the argument advanced here is that in some cases children's adaptations to the initial abuse may play a part in this. This does not conflict with the knowledge that young people living within stable and caring families can also become victims of sexual exploitation, often as a result of perpetrators attuning to and adapting manipulating aspects of normal adolescent development, as discussed above.

There is now a body of literature to support the main premise of betrayal trauma theory: that when a child experiences gross betrayal by someone they depend on to meet critical needs (eg caregiving, protection), they may reduce their awareness of this betrayal as a way of coping with the overwhelming feelings of threat and confusion it induces (for a review see DePrince et al, 2012). For example, a child who is sexually abused by her parent may engage in strategies that enable her to hold on to the belief that he is a caring father figure. One such strategy is to reduce her sensitivity to social rules and boundaries (termed a deficit in 'social cognition'). Adaptive (that is, self-preserving) in the abusive situation, this unfortunately leaves her at risk in adolescence (and later adulthood) of missing early indicators that a person is intent on exploiting her and therefore increases her risk of abuse (DePrince, 2005). Furthermore, even if there is some awareness that a person is acting exploitatively, young people often remain in the relationship because they crave

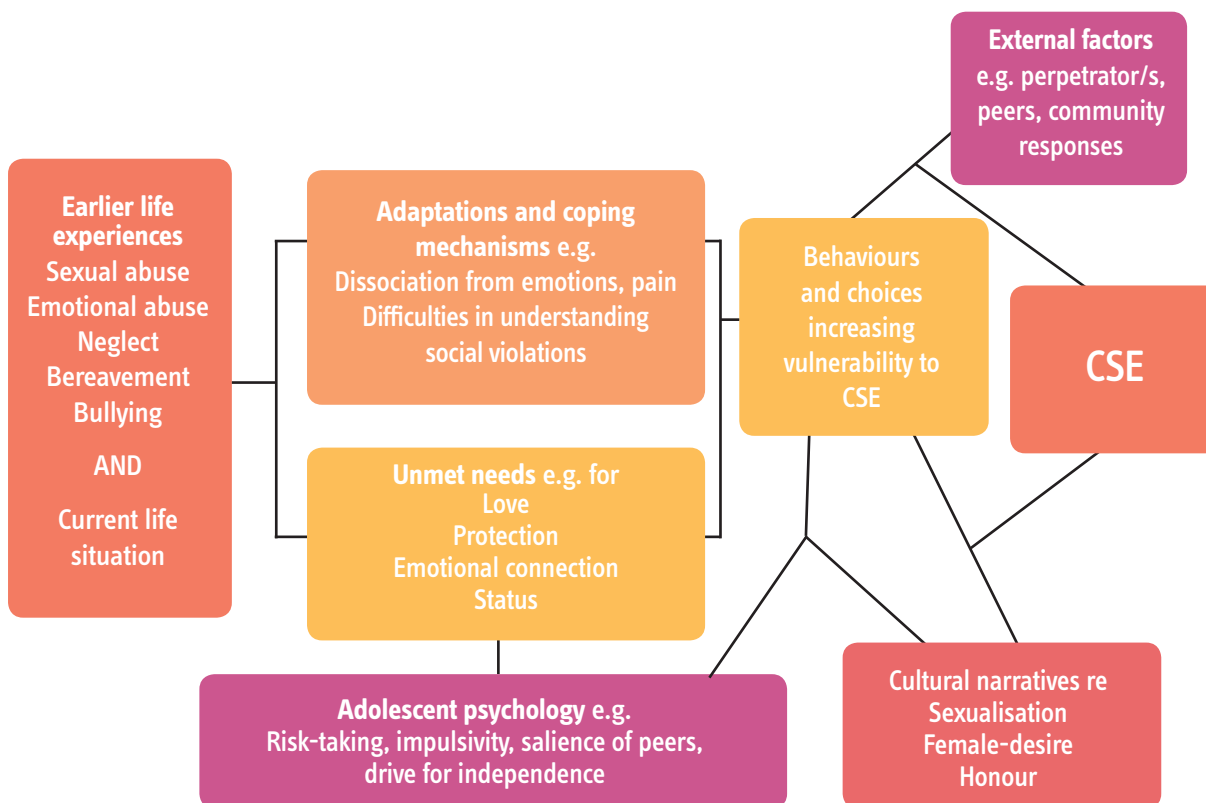
the fulfilment of fundamental human needs that were and remain unmet – for love, protection, emotional connection and belief from others. This may be accompanied by a sense (again developed in the context of prior maltreatment or neglect) that the exploitative relationship is the best hope of having those needs met, and/or that they do not deserve any better (Reid, 2011). A further element to this vicious spiral is that the capacity to dissociate from pain or negative feelings (also developed in response to earlier abuse) can compromise a young person's ability to recognise and adaptively respond to their own distress. It also appears that adolescents (and adults) can sometimes be motivated to return to abusive situations similar to those they experienced in the past (but now with greater perceived control) as an attempt to master the difficult feelings of helplessness that the earlier experiences elicited (a psychological process termed 're-enactment' – see Van der Kolk, 1989).

Faced with consequences of maltreatment that are likely to have begun prior to adolescence, adolescence brings the increased capacity and propensity to act on them, and the increased number of social worlds in which young people can do so. Once an abusive relationship has begun (albeit this is not always present in CSE), as in domestic abuse, attachment processes can kick in which paradoxically strengthen the abuser's psychological hold on a victim the more erratically and cruelly the abuser behaves (Dutton and Painter, 1993).

Another example of adaptations to prior adversity leading to increased risks are the socio-psychological pathways underpinning the offending of some young people (Lee and Hoaken, 2007). For example, maltreatment in earlier childhood can lead to children becoming hyper-vigilant to signs of threat, including potential shame, which they may then seek to protect themselves from with defensive aggression, often learnt through modelling and reinforcement (Farmer, 2011). Programmes that seek to build young people's resilience and minimise offending are therefore likely to be more effective in reducing this risk than those that only address offending behaviour (see Realising Ambition).

Recognising risk as being compounded by adaptive responses to earlier trauma can help local areas to develop service and practice responses that tackle underlying causes, and are therefore more effective in achieving sustainable positive change and avoid victim-blaming.

Figure 1 below illustrates the complex causal pathways to CSE; based on work by Reid (2011); DePrince (2005) and Kaestle (2012).



**Figure 1** An illustration of the presenting and underlying causes for CSE

Local and national strategies to address CSE may overlook some of the underlying causal pathways to risk, focusing instead on adolescent ‘behaviour and choices’ and ‘external factors’ such as disrupting perpetrator activity. Whilst understandable, this approach translates into practice whereby symptoms are managed rather than individual causes addressed. Recognising these underlying causes should not, of course, detract from the clear responsibility held by perpetrators.

## 4 Promoting resilience

### *What is resilience in adolescence?*

Resilience is the process by which an individual avoids or overcomes the negative effects of risk exposure (Fergus and Zimmerman, 2005). Arguably, several types of resilience are evident during adolescence:

- > avoiding risks that adolescents are predisposed to following earlier adversity or maltreatment in childhood – for example, avoiding sexual re-victimisation
- > avoiding serious risks (such as substance misuse) that adolescents may be predisposed to by virtue of their developmental stage (these overlap with the category above)
- > avoiding significant risks in the environment – for example, avoiding victimisation in a violent neighbourhood
- > avoiding longer-term harm associated with any of the above sets of risks – for example, avoiding addiction following substance misuse, or finding well-being and stability after an episode of running away.

It is important to have a clear understanding of what kind of resilience a service or a practitioner is seeking to support when directing resources and defining purpose.

Resilience is promoted by assets that reside within the individual, such as self-efficacy (the belief that one's own efforts can make a difference), social skills, reflectiveness, and a willingness to try new things. Typically, these are 'assets' that can be taught (see Reivich and Shatte, 2002). Resilience is also promoted by resources that exist within the social systems around the young person (also termed family and community assets); examples are authoritative parenting, having a trusted adult to turn to, and a positive school culture. (Demarcation between assets that reside *within* the young person and those that exist within the systems *around* the young person are not always clear, however.) Most resilience occurs when promotive factors feed into and enhance one another, setting up positive spirals and pathways. So for example, a willingness to try new things might enable a young person to try mentoring, which then builds their self-confidence and enables them to apply successfully for a work placement (and so on).

### *Pitfalls when thinking about resilience*

There are a number of pitfalls to be avoided when thinking about 'resilience'. One is that the term is sometimes used in a way that implies resilience is a static individual trait residing within a person ('*he's a resilient boy*'). This can be unhelpful as it detracts attention from promotive factors in the child's social spheres (and thus opportunities to build resilience may be missed) and places too much responsibility on the child for their response to adversity.

Furthermore, although there are some general themes (reviewed below), there is no single set of factors that promote resilience in the face of all risks. What enables adolescents to avoid offending when they grow up in a deprived neighbourhood may well differ from what helps them overcome the negative consequences of bullying.

And paradoxically, as discussed earlier,

rather like an inoculation, at times what promotes resilience in the face of risk is some degree of risk itself.

This can be a particular challenge for services and practitioners who might feel anxious about allowing or accepting risk as part of their professional role.

Lastly, resilience has its limits and efforts to promote resilience in the face of risk should never be at the expense of action to reduce significant risks. While overcoming the impact of maltreatment is a desirable outcome, it would have been far better not to have experienced maltreatment in the first place. And in the face of certain forms of adversity, it is likely that some negative impact will always remain.

### ***Factors that help adolescents overcome or avoid the negative impact of risks***

Earlier in the paper, we explored the ways in which adolescent development creates vulnerability to certain risks; in parallel, there are many aspects of adolescence that make it a fertile period in which to grow resilience. For example, as social circles widen and diversify, new friendships and relationships bring opportunities to build self-esteem and trust. With the right support, adolescents' increasing agency and knowledge can help them seek help for difficulties and escape negative trajectories. And in certain contexts, even risky decisions made by adolescents can promote resilience; for example, when a young person is exposed to the world of sex work in their home environment, running away can in fact reduce the likelihood that they will be sexually exploited (Klatt et al, 2014).

**Resilience is most likely when a child's assets, including those afforded by adolescent development, are met with support, experiences and opportunities.**

When a young person's increasing agency is matched with engaging and feasible opportunities to learn and train, to help others, or to participate in decisions that affect them, then key skills and resilience-promoting beliefs develop. This can create a virtuous cycle – for example, through supporting others a young person may come to believe more in their own self-worth and self-efficacy and to develop aspects of their own identity, all of which in turn promote their take-up and indeed creation of further opportunities.

### **Teens and Toddlers**

Teens and Toddlers is an early intervention programme that targets two sets of vulnerable children simultaneously, by pairing young people aged 13 to 16 from disadvantaged areas with children at local nurseries who are in need of extra support. The 18-week programme is run as a partnership between the voluntary sector, the local authority, schools and nurseries, and is currently offered in 17 London boroughs, eight local authorities in the north-west and a small number of others. Each young person spends time every week at nursery with their paired toddler, playing with and supporting them. Young people also attend classroom sessions aimed at developing relationship skills, aspirations, awareness of strengths and useful knowledge for navigating risks and life ahead. Through the programme, 92 per cent of graduates achieve an NCFE Level 1 QCF qualification in interpersonal skills. Research indicates that the programme heightens young people's self-confidence, positive decision-making and behaviours, relationships, and their further engagement and achievement in education, employment or training (Humphrey and Olivier, 2014). See [www.teensandtoddlers.org](http://www.teensandtoddlers.org)

At all ages of childhood, authoritative parenting protects against the experience and impact of risks. This parenting style is characterised by love and warmth paired with actively communicated boundaries and high expectations. It helps young people to avoid substantive risks associated with adolescence, such as substance misuse or disengagement from education (Chan and Koo, 2011). On the other hand, achieving or sustaining this form of parenting can be particularly challenging when children reach the adolescent stage (to some degree it will depend on the adolescent's 'willingness to be socialised' – Smetana et al, 2006); and if children do get caught up in risks, parenting can be further compromised. (Re-)establishing authoritative parenting in these situations is one of the most promising routes to reducing harm – for example, via intensive family interventions, the relational safeguarding model (described in Section 9), or support utilising the care system.

More generally, relationships with trusted adults promote resilience in a number of inter-related ways – for example, by:

- > developing young people’s self-esteem, trust, hope and sense of belonging
- > helping them to find and make the most of opportunities
- > enabling them to recognise and safely disclose maltreatment or difficulties
- > developing their abilities to act self-protectively and to apply their interests, values and aspirations effectively
- > helping them tackle difficulties (logistical, psychological or other) that contribute to risks (Adamson and Poultney, 2010; Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar et al, 2013; Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012; Rees et al, 2010).

Perhaps most fundamentally for vulnerable young people, the ongoing words and actions of such an adult demonstrate that the young person is someone to be valued and that other people can have positive intentions and be trustworthy. These fundamental messages counter those from other times or spheres in the young person’s life and help create a springboard for broader engagement in life.

The powerful influence of having a positive relationship with a trusted adult is critical to addressing risks and promoting resilience in young people.

Research has consistently documented the risks to young people when such relationships are absent – for example, depression, suicidality, self-harm and the continuation of abuse (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012).

A specific example of a positive and resilience-promoting relationship is the mentoring of at-risk young people (DuBois et al, 2011). At its heart, this involves a strong and meaningful personal connection between a young person and their (voluntary) mentor. The successes of mentoring depend on it following certain principles and are likely to lie in the scaffolding it provides for the development of the adolescent’s skills and positive identity (Rhodes, 2005).

Successful mentoring can involve adults or peers as mentors (DuBois et al, 2011). Peer support or mentoring has the additional benefit of promoting resilience for both parties. Vulnerable young people appear to particularly value receiving support from those who are ‘close’ to the difficulties they face or who have had similar experiences themselves (for example, see Coffey, 2014).

Finally, as a developmental stage that inevitably involves certain risks, adolescence should perhaps be re-conceptualised as something for which we, as a society, need to build resilience (that is, beyond resilience in the face of particular individual adversities). In other words, policy, practice and daily interactions should all employ and reflect the principle of ‘helping to keep adolescents safe and well’ through this life stage.

## 5 The interplay between choice and risk in adolescence

Choice is an aspect of risk that is rarely explored explicitly. Yet arguably:

many adults and professionals have opinions on choice that are implicit and which guide their approach to adolescents, often in counter-productive ways.

Some appear to view many of the harms that young people experience as having been freely 'chosen' in a way that is comparable to an adult choosing to engage in an activity – hence the use of terms such as 'lifestyle choice' applied to risks such as sexual exploitation. Others appear to take the opposite view, perceiving those same adolescents as straightforward victims of their circumstances, similar perhaps to younger children; from this perspective, the role of the adolescent's emerging agency in risks and resilience is minimised. (See media articles on the Rochdale sexual exploitation scandal from 2012 onwards for examples of professional perceptions of both types of misconception).

We need then to unpick these suppositions in order to formulate a more accurate, nuanced and ethical perspective that can usefully develop the principles behind practice. By considering the ways in which adolescent choices and behaviours are affected by development and prior adversity, as well as the ways in which they can feed into resilience (all explored above), we can reach some related conclusions:

- > Adolescents' choices and behaviours increase the likelihood that they will experience some risks (such as gang-involvement and some types of sexual exploitation, to name just a couple) and the harms associated with such risks.
- > However, these behaviours and choices are a part of a complex aetiological jigsaw and cannot be seen in isolation as leading to harm.
- > Where choice and behaviour are playing a part, this is typically because one or more of the following factors or processes are at work (and often interacting):
  - normative adolescent developmental processes (eg risk-taking, peer-influence, the desire for 'high-status' relationships)
  - adaptations to previous maltreatment and adversity (eg emotional numbing, difficulties detecting violations in social relationships, hyper-vigilance)
  - societal attitudes, policies and practices that interact with adolescent choice and behaviour to increase risk or harm (for example, responding to youth offending in ways that inadvertently reinforce criminal identity).
- > In other words, adolescent choice and behaviour in risk is constrained by developmental processes and the actions of others in their past and present, including choices that are in fact adaptive responses to previous harm.
- > These constraints can mean that an adolescent's choices and behaviours are, at times, not in their longer-term best interests. Like all of us, however, young people will also always have goals, aspirations and values that are consistent with their longer-term well-being (eg Opinion Research Business, 2000). These may be relatively hidden (and as discussed, may indeed be underpinning risky behaviours – see Pitts, 2013, for a discussion of this in relation to gangs), but young people can be supported to apply them in different ways that have longer-term benefit.
- > Constraints on choice and behaviour mean that adolescents are less responsible for their actions than adults making 'lifestyle choices'. And of course, in any scenario where a person is acting to harm a young person, the responsibility for the maltreatment rests with that perpetrator, whatever the contribution of the victim's choices to their own vulnerability.



This understanding leads to crucial implications for practice:

- > When adolescent choices and behaviours are seen to be playing a part in the risks that adolescents are experiencing, it would be erroneous (as well as harmful) to conclude that those choices are ‘informed’ and that adolescents are acting with complete ‘free will’ and have full responsibility for their actions.
- > In parallel, it would also be inaccurate in these situations to minimise or ignore the decisions and actions of adolescents and the part they are playing.

If we do not recognise and work with adolescent agency and choice, it will remain a potent force in their various vulnerabilities.

- > Reducing risk therefore involves working with young people (and key people in their worlds) to help them free themselves from unhelpful constraining forces (such as low self-esteem) and to channel their skills and developmental propensities (such as risk-taking, developing independence) towards acting in line with their aspirations and best interests. This is about empowering young people and is a key mechanism in promoting resilience.
- > Such an approach is likely to be most effective (and most ethical) when it is part of a broader package that also includes: a) working with any perpetrators and groups likely to inflict harm on young people, and b) a shift in any policy and practice that ‘ensnares’ young people by interacting with adolescent choices to increase the likelihood of risk and harm, often for the long term.

Discussion in this section has so far been concerned only with risks where adolescent choice and actions are playing a part. There are of course risks where this is not apparent, such as parental neglect driven by parental substance misuse. In these situations, working with adolescent agency may not be as critical to reducing immediate risk; it is likely to be just as important in building longer-term resilience, however.

The recent report examining the failures to recognise and respond effectively to endemic sexual exploitation in Rotherham (Jay, 2014) is not the only analysis to have found evidence of professionals minimising the abuse of adolescents, in part because they had come to erroneous conclusions about the nature and role of adolescent agency in the abuse (‘lifestyle choice’ narratives). Outrage at this stance and the role it played in perpetuating abuse is not misplaced. However, offering instead a simplistic narrative of adolescent passivity is unhelpful. What we are arguing here is that a nuanced perspective of adolescent choice and behaviour in risk represents a useful ‘third way’. This always places responsibility for any abuse with the person perpetrating the abuse, whilst recognising that constrained choices and actions on the part of young people can increase their vulnerability to some risks. Harnessing and channelling their agency is key to young people escaping these risks and building resilience.

This principle might be summed up with the phrase that is used to describe patient experience in the promotion of health reforms – ‘nothing about you without you.’ The reality of engaging with adolescent choices effectively is challenging, especially where adolescents are caught up in serious risk. In the next section we consider some of the issues around engagement and their implications for improving practice.

## 6 Overcoming challenges to engagement

We define engagement here as the process by which a practitioner and a young person and/or their family connect in an authentic relationship, committed to achieving certain goals together. Such relationships can be considered the bedrock to effective practice, but they often appear to be missing when we review how young people have been supported. It is worth unpicking some of the reasons why engagement is challenging.

### Challenges to engagement

Some risks that adolescents experience are what has been termed ‘ego-syntonic’, which means that to a greater or lesser degree individuals are attached, committed or ‘pulled’ to those risks. Self-harm, eating disorders, drug misuse, running away are all clear examples; sexual exploitation, gang involvement, and partner abuse may also fall into this category (‘pull factors’ for some of these risks are explored above).

If risks are meeting some of the young person’s needs in the short term, then the young person may be resistant to engaging with people or processes intent on removing those risks. This compels practitioners to understand the underlying drivers for risky behaviours, rather than treating the symptoms of it.

Many interventions also ‘go against the grain’ of the forces driving adolescent development. For example, interventions that are perceived to be about adult control conflict with the adolescent desire to grow in independence; interventions that force young people to ‘stand out from the crowd’ conflict with the importance of status and conformity among the peer group (ie risking the loss of social capital); and those that require a focus on distant goals or sanctions conflict with the propensity to focus on shorter-term horizons.

### Overcoming challenges to and securing engagement

**Interventions are most effective when they do not just avoid conflicts with adolescent development, but in fact take account of them and utilise them as a strength.**

For example, interest in risk-taking may encourage young people to participate in interventions that aim to develop such things as social skills, family relationships

and self-belief through experiencing adventure in the natural world (for a description of Capable Families, see the box below and also the Appendix of Practice Examples that accompanies this briefing).

### Capable Families

Capable Families is a set of family activity programmes based on systemic therapeutic practice run by Families Forward, a non-statutory team within children’s services at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). Referrals are received from social workers and cases remain open to a social worker throughout the programmes’ duration. Referral criteria include a young person being on the edge of care (linked to imminent risk of family breakdown) and a history of poor engagement with other services. Referred young people are often caught up in complex difficulties such as substance misuse, gang involvement, offending and exploitation.

Activity programmes include kayaking, climbing and survival, film, and gym and sports. Each involves a set number of sessions and outings in which coaches teach family members the skills involved in the activity, while systemic practitioners use the opportunities that arise from learning, facing challenges and doing something new to help families develop more positive narratives about strength and connection and to challenge negative views.

Exercises and games that strengthen communication, increase personal risk management and challenge power dynamics are integral to the programmes. Many of the programmes involve learning to handle and manage risk as a family – for example, the River Thames can be a dangerous environment in which to navigate a kayak. And when activities are more relaxing, opportunities also arise to talk about life, hopes and relationships in a natural and useful way.

These are some quotes from those who have taken part:

*‘Gave us time and helped our relationship.’*

*‘We felt really good about ourselves.’*

*‘We learned something about camping but also about what matters in life.’*

Similarly, 'irreverent' interventions such as Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (see box below) may appeal to young people's desire to step away from conformity to authoritative rules and restrictions.

### **Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)**

DBT is a therapeutic approach originally designed to help adults who suffer from a constellation of difficulties such as chronic self-harm, high risk-taking and relational victimisation, underpinned by insecure attachment patterns (Linehan, 1993). However, it has since also been applied to adolescents to good effect (Fleischhaker et al, 2011). DBT involves weekly individual and group sessions (supplemented by telephone support when necessary) focused on teaching four skill sets: mindfulness, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Part of DBT's general success – and its specific appeal with adolescents – may be its irreverent and paradoxical dimensions. For example, DBT eschews 'good advice', encouraging people to focus on doing what works for them and building a life worth living (appealing to adolescent drives towards independence and helping them connect to their goals and values). It also faces problems full on through 'radical acceptance', thereby embracing young people's often intense emotions, while at the same time inviting and empowering them to make the changes that work for them.

A DBT service specifically adapted for looked after adolescents is delivered in Oxfordshire. The service (which is funded by pooling money from health and local authority children's services) includes engagement sessions, weekends away, and consultation to carers and professionals to help create a validating and DBT-supportive environment outside of sessions. An evaluation has shown significant reductions in young people's depression, hopelessness and self-harm (James et al, 2011); and initial cost saving estimates suggest savings in the region of £150,000 per year (in which 37 referrals were received) (Alfoadari and Anderson, undated).

On a related note, it can also be a struggle to engage young people if they sense that the support or intervention might destabilise fragile approaches

they have developed themselves to cope with their problems. For example, there might be a fear that talking about difficulties will unleash overwhelming emotions, which have otherwise been blocked through alcohol misuse. Adolescents may also fear that engagement might lead to them feeling worse about themselves, for example through feeling stigmatised, blamed or 'problem-saturated'. Conversations that start with the problem and then stay focused on the problem can unwittingly convey all these things to a young person. In contrast, strengths-based, resilience-oriented and solution-focussed conversations can surprise young people with their positive assumptions and invite the development of wanted and empowering identities – this yields multiple benefits, including being inherently engaging. (For examples of this type of approach in practice see Clark, 1998; and Djukic, 2007).

Engagement can also be difficult when a young person's ability to trust others, in particular adults, has been significantly compromised by, for example, maltreatment within the family, and/or fleeting relationships with multiple professionals, the latter often driven by organisational constraints and practices (The Care Inquiry, 2013). Because of these past experiences, adolescents may struggle to believe that others will keep their commitments, have the right intentions, and/or, most fundamentally, be able to help them in any meaningful way (see Coffey, 2014, for some examples).

When a young person feels this way, they may adopt a (protective) disengaged and resistant stance, which further hinders the formation of such relationships – even though they often want to be proved wrong and to have a reason to shift their beliefs. What is often effective in this situation is to develop, through persistence and outreach, a relationship with that young person in which the adult consistently delivers on their commitments. Advocacy and practical help may be useful, both in and of themselves and via the impact they have on developing a young person's belief in their own worth and the efficacy of others.

There are a number of examples of this type of approach in the voluntary sector; one is the Barnardo's BASE team in Bristol which supports young people caught up in sexual exploitation and related difficulties. For more information go to: [www.barnardos.org.uk/basebristol/base\\_what\\_we\\_do.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/basebristol/base_what_we_do.htm)

**Supporting those who work with adolescents**

Lastly, if workers are not effectively supported in the complex task of engaging and understanding adolescents facing risk, then disengagement by young people can prompt practice that exacerbates it further. Many of those who work in this challenging field are employed in non-professionally accredited roles (for example, residential children’s home staff, mentors, or schools support workers) where clinical case supervision is not provided and/or expected. For those who work with them, adolescents’ choices in the risks they face can feel confusing.

Without support to help them understand adolescent choices, harness adolescent agency and build engagement, workers can be left feeling demoralised and disempowered. They may also have little support to deal with the emotional impact of working with high levels of risk and frequent rejection, and can feel isolated and without the necessary levers to achieve change.

When adolescents prove hard to engage, the isolation and lack of support experienced by many practitioners can convey ‘permission to give up’. This message is often implicitly also communicated via organisational policies – for example, in relation to termination of services following non-attendance. Young people, especially those who have experienced rejection or maltreatment in the past, are often attuned to signs of rejection, including ‘giving up’, and may respond with further disengagement. (For research exploring the links between maltreatment, rejection sensitivity and avoidant attachment, see, for example, Feldman and Downey, 1994.)

Table 3 summarises the factors that can hinder engagement and suggests initial strategies for overcoming or avoiding them.

Driver of engagement challenge	Suggested initial strategy
Ego-syntonic risk ( <i>‘a part of me wants to keep this problem’</i> ).	Explore what needs the risk is meeting and aim to meet them in other ways. Consider Motivational Interviewing to help a young person connect with what they most want in the longer term and to develop their belief in their ability to change (Barnett et al, 2012; Feldstein and Ginsburg, 2006).
Interventions ‘go against the grain’ of adolescent developmental drivers.	Restructure interventions to ‘go with the grain’ – eg involve high levels of adolescent participation, build social capital, include some risk-taking.
Adolescent fears that fragile coping mechanisms will be destabilised.	Identify and discuss the fears; in collaboration, formulate a plan to avoid destabilisation.
Adolescent fears feeling worse about her/himself.	Use strengths/resilience/solution-focused strategies.
Adolescent has low trust or belief in adults’ ability to help.	Develop a persistent, outreaching relationship that helps to meet the young person’s immediate needs, for example involving advocacy or practical help.
Professionals demoralisation; spirals in operation that give implicit ‘permission to give up’.	Ensure supportive supervision focused on complex issues, such as choice and engagement, in parallel with being part of a supportive network of workers and agencies.

**Table 3** Some factors behind engagement difficulties and how they might be addressed

## 7 The case for change

By drawing on research to understand risk and resilience in adolescence, and exploring evidence of effective services and approaches from existing practice, the case for system-wide change becomes compelling.

Although a good deal of strong practice does exist, all too often services do not recognise or respond to underlying causes of risks, do not adequately 'work with the grain' of adolescent development, do not consistently draw on the strengths of young people, their families and peers, and do not support practitioners sufficiently to manage the complexity involved in working with adolescent risk.

Researchers, commentators, those working within relevant services and young people themselves have observed that, too often, the response of the system is unacceptably ineffective. For example:

- > Many young people still find it hard to disclose risks they are experiencing (eg Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar et al, 2013).
- > Authentic and sufficiently intensive long-term relationships are often not part of the service response (eg Coffey, 2014).
- > In comparison to those facing younger children, for example, the risks young people face (and their impact) are often minimised (Gorin and Jobe, 2013).
- > Risks that differ most significantly from those faced by younger children are often ignored by existing systems or inappropriate responses are applied, such as dislocating young people from their peers and school communities (eg Firmin, 2013a and 2013b).
- > Interventions are often used which 'go against the grain' of young people's agency and development; disengagement can promote further exposure to risk (for example, at the extreme end, running away from care placements).
- > Care placements too often place young people at risk and break resilience-promoting factors (DfE, 2013b; The Care Inquiry, 2013; Jay, 2014).
- > Too few young people are offered effective support to recover from the impact of harm and to prevent revictimisation (eg Jay, 2014; Allnock et al, 2009).
- > System structures can result in young people feeling stigmatised and labelled (Byrne and Brooks, 2014; O'Mara et al, 2011).

The cumulative affect of all this – and therefore the most obvious risk of all of – is greater levels of abuse, harm and suffering experienced by young people, and the often highly negative impact this has on their childhood and on into their adult lives.

The system continues to expend scarce resources in ways that are not only ineffective but also incur further costs at later stages – for example, via mental health interventions and custody in later adolescence and adulthood (House of Commons Health Committee, 2014).

So what might systems and practices that are effective at reducing risks for adolescents, and at fostering resilience in the face of them, actually look like?

Arguably they would:

- > be proactive in building a picture of the distinctive risks that adolescents face, recognising contributors, their inter-dependency and their impact
- > plan approaches that address these risks as well as their antecedents and their consequences (often across a range of social spheres)
- > prioritise authentic relationships and broader resilience-promoting factors in this process
- > work in partnership with the young person and their families (where possible)
- > support the workforce to understand the evidence, and manage the challenge and complexity that this work involves
- > avoid harmful practices such as labelling young people according to their risks or behaviours, or maximising or minimising their agency in risks.

All of this would, of course, rest on standard good practices, such as embedding and applying evaluation and involving young people in service design and delivery.

All this is convergent with the many creative, engaging, and likely effective, adolescent-friendly approaches and services being developed and delivered locally across the UK. However, more widespread reform would be further enabled by:

- > appreciation of the cost-savings involved: although there are up-front costs involved in delivering the shift discussed above, there are far more substantial costs involved in maintaining the status quo (see for example Godar, 2014).
- > understanding and applying the now rich understanding we have of adolescent development, risk and resilience to shape practice
- > a willingness to put aside archaic system responses that were not designed to tackle the risks adolescents face in the UK today
- > joining the growing movement towards appreciating children's rights, in particular for meaningful participation
- > making the most of the opportunities afforded by digital technology, the drive towards localism, and the austerity-drive push to 'do something more with less' (Byrne and Brooks, 2014)
- > developing a spirit of creativity in partnership: for example, leaders applying this evidence to innovate in their local areas, with the involvement of young people, families and the workforce.

As part of this 'enabling' process, the remainder of this paper explores how our increased understanding of adolescence, risk and resilience could be applied to practice.

## 8 Emerging principles for effectively addressing adolescent risk

What we now know about adolescent risk and resilience, development and adaptation has key implications for improving practice, which dovetail with those arising from effective and promising interventions with young people. We have attempted to articulate these implications in the form of seven principles that appear to be *particularly important for effective practice with adolescents*. These are outlined in Table 4, which also provides a brief rationale for each principle, and – in the extended stand-alone version of the table – examples of their application in practice.

Our seven principles align well with others designed for inter-related areas of practice with adolescents. For example, in their six principles ‘to shape thinking about young people’s health’, Public Health England include: putting relationships at the centre, focusing on what helps young people feel well and able to cope, and championing integrated and accessible services (PHE, in press).

An important caveat is that the seven principles are not stand-alone. Rather, they are designed to complement long-standing principles for best practice in addressing risks across the age range (see for example Munro, 2011). A baseline framework for tackling the serious risks children face is largely embedded across the sector; it includes:

- > multi-agency communication
- > drawing upon resources, skills and responsibilities across agencies and services
- > close attention to vulnerability at transition points
- > a focus on developing resilience and strengths
- > embedding ongoing evaluation and application of its results
- > children’s participation in service development, delivery and evaluation
- > tackling the spectrum of risks in a child’s life
- > intervening early in the life of a problem
- > being a part of a wider strategy, which includes primary and secondary prevention approaches.

Principle	Rationale and further explanation
<b>1: Work with adolescent development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; If we do not recognise and work with adolescent agency and developmental drivers, they can remain a potent force in adolescent vulnerabilities.</li> <li>&gt; Resilience develops when young people are given opportunities to connect with, and apply positive decision-making to, their aspirations and values.</li> <li>&gt; It is vital to avoid policies and practices that respond to adolescent choices and behaviours by constraining positive development and inadvertently ‘ensnaring’ them (see Section 3). As such, avoid responses that ‘do to’ adolescents rather than ‘work with’ them.</li> </ul>
<b>2: Work with young people as assets and resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; This directly builds young people’s self-esteem, skills and confidence, while more generally utilising their strengths and insights to develop services and responses that are most effective.</li> <li>&gt; Young people’s voices are a source of important and useful information regarding practice quality, organisational performance and local needs.</li> </ul>
<b>3: Promote supportive relationships between young people and their family and peers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Authoritative parenting is arguably the most effective means for helping most young people chart a safe course through adolescence.</li> <li>&gt; Other family relationships (eg between parents, siblings, extended family) can also powerfully build resilience.</li> <li>&gt; Peers are critically important to young people and peer relationships have the potential to promote specific social skills and sources of self-esteem.</li> <li>&gt; Together, positive family and peer relationships enable young people to access and make the most of their opportunities, to build key skills and develop positive beliefs about themselves and others, and to recognise and disclose any risks they are facing.</li> </ul>

<p><b>4: Prioritise supportive relationships between young people and key practitioner(s)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Both research and practice consistently point to the central role that supportive, committed relationships between keyworkers and young people play in successfully reducing risk and building resilience.</li> <li>&gt; Barriers to a relational approach include service boundaries that are thresholds-based rather than needs-led – leading to multiple people working with a young person and frequent changes of lead worker; practitioner low self-confidence; and inspection and governance that is overly focused on processes rather than outcomes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5: Take a holistic approach both to young people and the risks they face</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Working narrowly with young people around a single difficulty or risk can: a) label and so constrain young people; and b) miss the opportunity to utilise their skills, aspirations and other strengths. Young people recognise this and have concerns about overly targeted programmes (O'Mara et al, 2011).</li> <li>&gt; In addition, risks often coalesce and intersect during adolescence, and come from a wider variety of contexts than those faced by younger children. They also have complex aetiological pathways that involve a combination of environmental and psychological factors – both need to be addressed to avoid risks persisting or re-appearing.</li> <li>&gt; In this context, it is arguably most effective to build an approach based on a holistic assessment of the risks a young person is experiencing (and their contributors) as well as a holistic understanding of strengths (as opposed to multiple services dealing with discrete risks, often with limited attention to their contributors or intersections).</li> </ul>
<p><b>6: Ensure services are accessible and advertised</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Approaches are likely to be most effective if they provide support when adolescents need and want it; and when they are responsive to adolescent agency (without requiring that agency to be comparable to that of an assertive and informed adult who can navigate complex referral pathways).</li> <li>&gt; In other words, for young people to be able to make positive choices, they need to know about the range of positive options. This may require advertising and outreach to articulate the benefits.</li> </ul>
<p><b>7: Equip and support the workforce</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Young people can be difficult to engage, due to adaptive features of adolescent development and adaptations to previous life experiences. Sometimes multiple experiences of being 'let down' by the system can contribute.</li> <li>&gt; A nuanced view of the risks a young person is facing, including an understanding of any choices they are making and why, can take time to arrive at; but this is essential in order to map a way forward and avoid demoralisation and disengagement.</li> <li>&gt; Working with young people experiencing high levels of serious risks can be vicariously traumatising. While such works <i>requires</i> connection with young people, connection can come at a high emotional cost for practitioners.</li> <li>&gt; Young people want ongoing relationships. Obviously, these are more likely to occur if organisations are successful in retaining staff over the longer term.</li> </ul>

**Note:** This is a summary version the principles and their rationale. A stand-alone version of this table, offering examples of how these principles can be applied in practice can be found [here](#).

It is worth noting that these principles closely intersect, so that fulfilling one often requires attention to others. For example, working with adolescent agency and development typically requires prioritising supportive relationships, so an example of one is often also an example of others. However, they each have a distinctive message.



## 9 Explicated examples – the principles in practice

This section explores in more depth the seven principles set out in Table 4 (see Section 8) and considers some examples of those principles in practice. (Other practice examples are highlighted in earlier sections, and see also the Appendix of Practice Examples that accompanies this briefing.) Both the principles and their exemplars are likely to be most useful when read as inspiration and ideas for ways forward, rather than as a constraining or finite list.

We are at an early stage of building a distinctive and more effective approach to tackling risk in young people. In this context, leadership and innovation accompanied by evaluation can have a big impact on driving forward positive change. At the same time, small changes to everyday practice can also make a significant difference.

Here we describe examples from across this range, drawn from the international arena and UK local areas. We focus on practice in children's services, as well as considering effective ways of working across a range of agencies.

### **Principle: 'Work with adolescent development - particularly perception, agency, aspiration, and skills'**

If adolescent decision-making, behaviour and aspirations are contributing to adolescents' experience of serious risk, it makes sense that those risks are likely to reduce if we engage with young people to help them instead utilise these things to fulfil goals that are in their longer-term best interests. Young people will always have aspirations for a positive future. However, they may need support in accessing, developing and acting upon those hopes. We also need to build a system that hears and takes seriously adolescents' sense of threat (as this will often, accurately, perceive risk where systems do not – see, for example, Rees et al, 2011) and supports their attempts to protect themselves.

As with each of these principles, multiple examples of how they might be applied in practice are listed in Table 4. A few are outlined in more detail below.

### *Open-access emergency accommodation*

In Denmark, Germany, France and the United States young people can themselves access emergency accommodation directly if, for example, they have run away from their family, foster care or residential home. This emergency accommodation is well publicised and is sometimes linked to counselling, a telephone helpline and family therapy where appropriate (Boddy et al, 2009; Slesnick, 2004).

### *Invitational, narrative, and appreciative inquiry 'therapeutic' approaches*

These approaches converge in helping young people to separate their sense of self from their difficulties, so that the problems they face no longer act as a constraint on their developing identity and actions (see McAdam and Lang, 2009; Morgan, 2000; Slattery, 2003). Such approaches also raise young people's awareness of their own skills, strengths, values and aspirations, so that these develop and become a stronger influence in their lives. These 'therapeutic' approaches can be used in day-to-day interactions with young people, as well as formal therapy.

### **Principle: 'Work with young people as assets and resources'**

Although individual practitioners are usually committed to listening to young people and involving them in decisions that affect them, the 'system' often does not enable young people to actively contribute to decision-making. Barriers to participation can be found in processes that deter young people, such as child protection conferences (Gorin and Jobe, 2013), or in structural elements, such as looked after young people not being enabled to share decision-making about their care placement (The Care Inquiry, 2013).

Given the evidence discussed above regarding young people's ability to understand risk and to provide support to others facing risk, the failure to draw upon young people as assets and resources is a significant missed opportunity.

Young people also have much to offer in terms of supporting service design, though too often efforts to involve them are tokenistic (Cavet and Sloper, 2004). Schemes such as the Young Inspectors Programme<sup>5</sup> and youth councils can be effective. However, given the current marginalisation of some adolescents facing risk, particular attention should be paid to involving those young people in the continuous improvement of specific services designed to address risk.

### Street Safe Lancashire

Street Safe Lancashire is a voluntary sector service working with children and young people at risk of CSE and other forms of harm. (The service works as part of Lancashire's four multi-agency CSE teams.) Each young person supported by Street Safe has the opportunity to contribute their views and knowledge in a variety of ways, including one-to-one, in group-work, and in writing or pictures. The 'Purple Monsters' group consists of young people who have experienced CSE coming together to share their thoughts, support others and influence services. The group has produced a booklet for professionals on 'How not to work with young people' full of personal stories, comments, poems, pictures, advice and guidance. This appears to be increasing identification and engagement of vulnerable young people. Young people also contribute to service improvement by feeding in their views through one-to-ones with an independent worker, speaking at conferences and contributing towards the development of other guidance for professionals.

For more information go to [http://speakoutlancashire.org.uk/?page\\_id=181](http://speakoutlancashire.org.uk/?page_id=181) and see also the Ofsted good practice example: 'Involving children and young people in developing the services they receive: Street Safe Lancashire' (2013), available from [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice)

### Principle: 'Promote supportive relationships between young people and their family and peers'

Given that 1) risks facing young people often arise from outside their home environment, 2) authoritative and supportive parenting promotes resilience across a range of risks, and 3) this form of parenting is often compromised in situations of high risk (for example, gang members or CSE perpetrators isolating young people from familial support), it makes sense that any safeguarding strategy for young people should prioritise supporting families to support their adolescent (unless assessment reveals contraindications).

### Family support workers and the 'relational safeguarding model'

PACE (Parents against child sexual exploitation) have devised the 'relational safeguarding model' to improve the safeguarding of children in families affected by child sexual exploitation. The model has been implemented in partnership with local agencies in Oxford, Rochdale and across Lancashire. It is a flexible model of practice that both engages with parents as partners in the safeguarding process and supports them in dealing with the practical and psychological impacts of CSE upon the whole family. Practice is based on the assumptions that parents want their children to be safe and are central assets in the task of achieving this. Although the model can be implemented in a variety of ways, PACE argue that it can be most easily achieved by embedding an independent parent support worker (IPSW) within teams that work with CSE, alongside changes to organisational cultures which traditionally identify parents as a threat to safety (PACE, 2014). A recent independent evaluation in Lancashire indicates positive outcomes of this approach (Palmer and Jenkins, 2012).

For more information go to [www.paceuk.info](http://www.paceuk.info) and see also The Relational Safeguarding Model: Best practice in working with families affected by child sexual exploitation (2014) [www.paceuk.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Relational-Safeguarding-Model-FINAL-PRINTED-May-2014.pdf](http://www.paceuk.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Relational-Safeguarding-Model-FINAL-PRINTED-May-2014.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> More information on the Young Inspector approach can be found at <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/topics/young-inspectors>

### *Focused family interventions*

There are a number of evidenced interventions that focus on improving family functioning (including parenting) in order to reduce serious risks to adolescents, such as substance misuse and homelessness (eg Slesnick et al, 2013; Waldron et al, 2007; Warwick and Kwan, 2011). For example, the Strengthening Families Programme, which aims to reduce substance misuse in particular, helps parents develop authoritative parenting, communication skills and strategies for dealing with stress. At the same time, young people develop skills to help them deal with peer pressure, cope with stress, communicate more effectively and manage their emotions. UK research suggests the programme is effective in reducing early adolescents' substance use, as well as building a range of resilience factors such as family functioning (Coombes et al, 2009).

Another example is Community Reinforcement and Family Training (CRAFT) which works with parents of substance-misusing teenagers to develop their abilities to a) communicate effectively with their child, b) help their child to engage in treatment, and c) support the child's treatment and recovery (Waldron et al, 2007). Both approaches are likely to offer promise in wider application beyond the risk of substance misuse.

### **Adolescent Support Unit: An alternative to care approach, Blackburn and Darwen**

Blackburn with Darwen Council's Adolescent Support Unit is a successful 'alternative to care' model, which provides short breaks for young people experiencing problems within the family and who are at risk of being taken into care. The ASU has been developed over the last seven years by reinvesting funds from the closure of a residential children's home (the council still runs two residential homes). It was developed in the knowledge that some young people do not need to be in care but do need intensive support, possibly over the long term, and that some families need interventions that are available in a crisis 24/7, including 'time out'.

Residential staff are skilled workers trained in a variety of ways to enable them to work with families and young people to improve relationships and family lives on an outreach basis. For example, staff are trained to deliver specialist courses such as Strengthening Families, AIM, Team-Teach and Boys Own. The ASU provides positive opportunities and activities for young people, including canoeing, fishing, cookery and participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. The service has generated significant year-on-year savings, in excess of £800,000 in 2013-14 and with 28 fewer young people being brought into care than when the unit opened. For more information, see [www.adass.org.uk/uploadedFiles/adass\\_content/events/ncasc\\_2014/2014\\_Presentations/WI2%20Alternatives%20to%20care.ppt](http://www.adass.org.uk/uploadedFiles/adass_content/events/ncasc_2014/2014_Presentations/WI2%20Alternatives%20to%20care.ppt) (see also the following Guardian article, from 29 October 2014: [www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2014/oct/29/blackburn-innovative-support-unit-residential-care](http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2014/oct/29/blackburn-innovative-support-unit-residential-care)

**Principle: ‘Prioritise supportive relationships between young people and key practitioner(s)’**

The centrality of positive relationships with adults has been highlighted previously as a key protective factor for young people at risk. The forthcoming public health framework for young people states clearly that ‘*Recognising and supporting healthy relationships is central to improving young people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing*’ (PHE, in press), while young people themselves frequently highlight their frustration at being passed from one professional to another (The Care Inquiry, 2013). Recent reports exploring CSE have also identified the need for young people to have consistent and trusting relationships with adults to help keep them safe (Coffey, 2014; Berelowitz et al, 2012).

*Evidence-based mentoring programmes*

Evidence-based mentoring programmes (DuBois et al, 2011) develop resilience in young people by building and developing skills (such as social skills and the ability to regulate emotion), a sense of identity and belief in oneself and others. Mentoring programmes are most effective when there is a) a good ‘fit’ between the mentor and the young person, b) adherence to core principles (such as mentor screening, support and training), and c) a focus beyond general non-directive ‘chat’. These latter points highlight the critical importance of ensuring mentoring interventions are well-resourced, and designed to include robust support for mentors. Peer mentoring is not a cheap option.

Chance UK is a model of focused mentoring (linked to other sources of support) for primary school children with behavioural difficulties, which holds promise in preventing gang involvement and sexual exploitation. For more information, go to: [www.chanceuk.com](http://www.chanceuk.com)

**Principle: ‘Take a holistic approach both to young people and the risks they face’**

One challenge of tackling the inter-related risks that young people face is that services and practice too often delineate between those risks and between causal and resultant risks. This creates spurious boundaries, and fails to recognise that an holistic approach is needed.

*Regular well-being enquiries*

Research has shown that a significant number of young people do not disclose maltreatment because they have few opportunities to do so (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar et al, 2013). Regularly and authentically ‘checking in’ with young people about how they are and what is going on for them communicates that the person asking ‘cares’ (which is key to facilitating disclosure) *and* provides an opportunity to discuss matters that are significant.

These conversations can also develop a young person’s ability to recognise abuse and take what protective action they can (Cossar et al, 2013). Practitioners can make well-being enquiries (undertaken in a natural and genuine fashion) as part of their routine practice, as well as prompt parents and carers to do so.

*Generic adolescent services*

Generic adolescent teams have great potential to offer relationship-centred, participatory and ‘informalised’ support. One example is the Surrey Youth Support Service – see box on following page.

## Surrey Youth Support Service

In 2012, Surrey disbanded its youth offending team and incorporated the YOT's functions into a wider youth support service (YSS). The Surrey YSS comprises 11 local teams, and utilises a proactive keyworker approach to help and support young people experiencing one or more of a range of risks. Those risks include homelessness, disengagement from education, employment or training, mental health difficulties (where the young person is open to but not engaged with CAMHS) and offending. The team also work with adolescents categorised as 'children in need'.

A young person's caseworker will work with the young person to understand their view of the situation and to develop a holistic package of support. Support is mostly delivered by the caseworker, who brings in suitably qualified specialists for advice and co-work when required. In this way, the relationship between the young person and their keyworker is developed and harnessed as the central driver of change. Keyworkers focus on young people's strengths and work with the young person to find opportunities to develop these.

The YSS works closely with other council-led teams, such as housing, and also has developed partnerships with public, voluntary and private sector employers and local economic partnerships to provide a route to training and employment opportunities for young people.

This 'one-stop shop' approach and having one individual keyworker means young people don't have to navigate complex pathways (with the associated risks of rejection and delay) and can instead have multiple needs met through one holistic package. Labelling is also minimised when young people are supported by the generic YSS rather than a YOT. The YSS approach also has the potential for cost-savings.

For more details see Byrne and Brooks (2014), which also outlines how this model arose from opportunities within the current policy context.

## Multi-agency working arrangements / multi-agency teams

These can be used to avoid multiple services duplicating work with young people (and the associated risk of disengagement) and to support 'one keyworker' and 'no wrong door' approaches. Examples include the Youth MARAC in Lewisham and the Lancashire multi-agency CSE teams. Ofsted has published good practice examples for both: 'Trailblazing a multi-agency approach to support and enable young victims of serious crime to feel safer and more secure: Lewisham' (2013), and 'Tackling child sexual exploitation: Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council' (2013), which can be found at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice)

## Easily accessible training and apprenticeship schemes

One such scheme is the Pathways programme in Ealing. This is a six-month pre-employment programme offered to all at-risk young people. (For a full description and a personal statement about its impact, see the Appendix of Practice Examples that accompanies this briefing.) The programme includes an employment-based placement in the council for three days a week, with training. Support is also provided for health, accommodation and other needs. Reporting indicates 'an 85 per cent success rate with a very vulnerable group'; this appears to be because of the programme's ability to build self-esteem, self-efficacy and life skills, as well as creating practical opportunities through the employment experience.

## Programmes that address contributors to victimisation

The Pattern Changing programme (Goodman and Fallon, 1995; McTiernan and Taragon, 2004) helps to prevent domestic abuse revictimisation by building women's self-esteem, assertiveness, reflective capacity, and their knowledge of rights and healthy relationships. Such an approach could be adapted to address young people's psychological vulnerabilities to partner abuse; this would likely be most effective in conjunction with parallel approaches that target individuals at risk of perpetrating.

**Principle: 'Ensure services are both accessible and advertised'**

Currently when a young person is aware of the risk they are caught up in, it can be difficult for them to know where they should go to get the right support. And even when they do know, getting to this source of support may depend on overcoming a number of logistical and psychological barriers (for example, talking to their parents about the problem; attendance at intimidating meetings; waiting with no guarantee of the outcome).

However, adolescents' emerging agency and independence seeking are skills that they can use to escape certain risks (and their impact), if they are given effective routes and support to do so. When a young person recognises they need help to address a risk in their life, we should match this with accessible and early help.

In this spirit, and in recognition of the ways in which young people access information,

all services that aim to support at-risk young people should provide mechanisms for self-referral, employ social marketing to raise awareness of the support they offer, and adopt assertive outreach to target at risk groups (Bamberg et al, 2011; Ozechowski and Waldron, 2010).

*Self-referral, social marketing and assertive outreach*

The charity MAC-UK ([www.mac-uk.org](http://www.mac-uk.org)) provides a good example of the use of outreach to connect young people at risk of mental health difficulties and violence to effective support and resilience-building projects. It was set up directly in response to the low levels of young people accessing help in CAMHS despite evidence of high levels of need. Examples of statutory services that offer self-referral routes include Parkside CAMHS in West London, and the Youth Inclusion Support Panel (YSIP) in South Devon. Via these routes young people can act on their awareness of a problem to receive immediate responsive help and connections to other resources.

*Accessible information about a service designed by young people*

A general message from research is that people experiencing risks would like more information about the services available to them (Easton et al, 2013; PHE, in press). Service information that is designed by young people themselves can be particularly engaging; it communicates a sense of inclusivity and can reduce feelings of isolation or stigma. Additional benefits include developing the skills and confidence of those designing the information, and matching communication to the right developmental stage (although young people, like adults, may require support in making information accessible to those with literacy, language or learning difficulties).

Information is likely to be most accessible when delivered via a variety of media – for example, radio, magazines, social networking sites, posters, blogs, and face-to-face (EdComms, 2009; also see Stanley et al, 2009, and TNS Social, 2009, for information about effective social marketing to 'hard-to-reach' groups). Young people who have used a service will have the best sense of how to most effectively deliver information to others like themselves.

*Blended universal and targeted programmes*

Triple P is a highly effective approach to increasing positive parenting and reducing maltreatment (Sanders et al, 2014; and for more information see [www.triplep.net](http://www.triplep.net)), including with high-risk groups and adolescents. Its blending of a universal and targeted approach appears to be part of the reason for the programme's success (Poole et al, 2014; Fives et al, 2014). Parents can enter the universal programme and also choose more intensive intervention should they become aware of a need for it. This approach means that more people with higher levels of need access the targeted intervention, as there is less stigma attached to doing so. Also, the programme is able to reach the target population without 'over-servicing' and there is no need for comprehensive assessments to manage access and thresholds. This blended 'universal-targeted' approach could be used across a variety of areas; it rests on the assumption that people will ask for the right levels of support when that support is accessible and non-stigmatising.

**Principle: ‘Equip and support the workforce’**

In order to identify and respond to adolescent risk effectively, practitioners who support young people must be well supported. However,

this work is complex, emotionally demanding and often politically charged. To ask practitioners to work in such an environment without high-quality training, support and supervision undervalues them and the young people they support.

A strong and widespread understanding of adolescent risks (and their dynamics), resilience, engagement and how all this relates to adolescent development, can act as a springboard for a myriad of improvements. Training is a primary means of developing such understanding, although care must be taken to ensure that applied learning and ‘training transfer’ is enabled (Research in Practice, 2012).

As well as embedding understanding from research, learning and development opportunities for staff should also support practitioners to acquire and maintain an ‘adolescent practice’ skill set. This would involve adding some specific skills to an existing core set of skills for working with all children and young people. It would usefully build on practitioners’ existing expertise, much of which may be natural and intuitive. Young people would, of course, be valuable partners in the design, delivery and impact-evaluation of such training and career pathways.

**Core training for all who work with adolescents facing risk**

1. Adolescent development and adaptivity
2. Adolescent risks: their nature, impact and contributors
3. Nuanced perspective of adolescent choice and behaviour in certain risks and implications for practice
4. Resilience in relation to risks in and implications for practice
5. Engagement skills for working with adolescents and their families

**Table 5** Suggested training for all practitioners who routinely work with adolescents experiencing risk

Needless to say training is most useful when workers practise within a framework which complements learning (see Table 4).

*Adolescent specialists (an example of a ‘draw down’ model)*

The baseline level of understanding and skill introduced in the training described above could be complemented by support and input from ‘adolescent experts’ within an agency or within a multi-agency working arrangement. The introduction of such experts could improve practice in a variety of interlinked ways – for example, people acting on the basis of consultations with the expert, thereby avoiding the escalation of cases; retention of adolescent practice expertise through the new career pathway; and by providing a channel for innovation and the introduction of new ideas. This model is not unique: consultant social workers / social work practice leads are becoming more widely used, and principal education psychologists and some mental health clinicians operate in this ‘draw down’ way already.

## 10 Conclusion

This paper argues that a paradigm shift is now needed in how we understand and respond to risk in adolescence. Specifically, it argues that adolescence, as a discrete and critical period of child development characterised by increasing agency, a formative drive towards independence and a focus on peer relationships and social groups that extend beyond the family, requires a complex and nuanced response that reflects the realities and opportunities of this life stage. A child protection system that is conceptualised primarily around preventing harm and maltreatment among younger children, who may be most at risk within their own family, is not well placed to serve the needs of adolescents.

Currently, local authority spending on the protection of adolescents is weighted heavily towards the care system, even though research shows that outcomes for late entrants to care are often poor. Of course, many such placements do provide effective and ongoing support, but care solutions are not and cannot be an effective sole response to the distinctive risks that adolescents face. Similarly, whilst many adolescents are supported through the traditional child protection system, all too often this system is not able to meet their needs effectively. And yet, as this paper has shown in the practice it describes and in the Appendix of Practice Examples that accompanies it, there are many emerging examples of promising and innovative local practice around the country and beyond from which we can learn.

At a time of sustained austerity it becomes more important than ever that resources are allocated to optimal effect. Indeed, the challenge of constrained resources can sometimes act as a catalyst for innovation, and there is evidence to suggest that this is the case currently in relation to redesigning services for adolescents. Leaders of local children's services are uniquely placed to direct shifts in thinking and in spending so that we may more effectively reduce adolescent risk. This evidence scope argues that this can best be achieved by ensuring that strategies, services and practice all 'work with the grain' of adolescent development, recognise young people as partners in the work, and harness the distinctive strengths and opportunities that adolescence brings.

None of this is easy and much of it will require imagination, determination and innovative thinking; it may well involve the taking of some risks. But for young people, their families, and those working to improve the lives of at-risk young people, the rewards will be considerable.



# That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence

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**With grateful thanks to** Kathryn Brooks, Sarah Caton, Jackie Clementson, Vicki Giles, Rebecca Godar, Ann Hagell, Joanne Hay, Kate Shethwood and Members of the ADCS Families, Communities and Young People Committee for their comments on the resource.

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