The PCFSW Digital Research & Practice Development Project

Social Work England and PCFSW Best Practice Guide for Assessing Online Risks, Harm and Resilience and Safeguarding of Children and Young People Online

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Purpose and objective:

This guidance has been developed by Social Work England and the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) network in consultation with practitioners, managers and the PCFSW reference group. It aims to support social workers in considering holistic safeguarding, including online risks and harm.

Given the extent children and young people's use of digital technologies and the importance of online identity and relationships in their lives, online risks and harm can have significant impact on children and young people's development and well-being. Therefore, this guidance offers a systematic approach to thinking about and assessing online risks, harm and resilience and safeguarding children and young people online,

Audience:

This document is aimed at social work and social care practitioners and managers as well as qualifying social work students.

Content and use of this document

Important note: It is important to note that social workers should not search, access or otherwise view or use social media postings by service users in an unauthorised or unethical manner. Social workers should strictly follow current guidance and legislation and obtain the necessary information for their assessments and safeguarding of children and young people though appropriate ethical and authorised means and approaches only.

Below is a list of content with links to the different topics in this guide:

My regulator: Social Work England
Professional standards
Framework for assessment of online risks, harm and resilience
Young people's views and experiences
Framework for holistic assessment of children and families
Practice tool for assessing online risks and resilience

Understanding my regulator: Social Work England

Social Work England is the specialist regulator for social workers in England. Our role is to set professional standards and assure the public's confidence in social work. We are collaborating on this guide to support social workers in understanding the link between our professional standards and practice.

In response to Covid-19, you may need to adapt your practice and ways of working. In doing so, we encourage you to think carefully about the professional standards and how to maintain them against a rapidly changing context. This guide offers up practical advice from sector leaders to support you as you adapt.

It is important to reflect on changes to practice and to explore professional and ethical dilemmas with peers or managers. Social workers are doing this as they explore new and different ways of working. This can be an important source of learning to record as part of your continuing professional development, which is central to your registration as a social worker.

Some social workers have returned to the profession during the pandemic through temporary registration. There can be a lot to consider when returning to practice. We hope this guide will support you as you support local teams and services at a time of considerable pressure.

We thank the Principal Social Workers networks for their commitment to embedding the professional standards and we continue to work collaboratively to make the link between standards and practice.

Professional standards

When using social media and digital technologies, practitioners should consider and apply the professional standards. Standards with a particular reference to online conduct include professional standard:

2.5.   As a social worker, I will actively listen to understand people, using a range of appropriate communication methods to build relationships.

3.10. As a social worker, I will establish and maintain skills in information and communication technology and adapt my practice to new ways of working, as appropriate.

5.6. As a social worker, I will not use technology, social media or other forms of electronic communication unlawfully, unethically, or in a way that brings the profession into disrepute.

For further details about ethical use of social media and digital technologies social workers should consult the PCFSW and Social Work England's Best Practice Guide for Digital Professionalism.

Framework for assessment of online risks, harm and resilience

Digital technologies and online communications and interactions are an important part of young people's lives and everyday experiences and have a significant impact on their identity, relationships and development. It is essential that social workers recognise the importance of online experiences and their impact on the lives of young people and are able to safeguard children and young people both online and offline in ways that support their healthy development, promote their digital resilience and enhance their identity and relationships both online and offline.

Therefore, in supporting and safeguarding children and young people and as part of their due diligence, social workers should think about and consider the following areas of development and their impact on young people's identity, relationships, and development. It is important to note that each of these areas can be a source of positive growth and resilience and can serve as a protective factor or can be a source of vulnerability or harm for young people. Practitioners should aim to use a relationship-based and motivational approach to safeguarding and support young people's positive development in each of these areas.

This requires a good understanding of digital risks and online harm as well as digital professionalism (see the PCFSW and Social Work England's Best

Digital Assault
Online activities can have physical and personal consequences. The Dallas County Court, Texas Case No. F1700215 was the first such case to recognise digital assault and the charges of battery and assault as a result of a digital attack using flashing GIF images with intent to cause seizure in a person with epilepsy. In November 2019, there was a similar mass cyberattack on the Twitter® followers of the US epilepsy foundation. These are examples of new types of digital risks.

Practice Guidance for Digital Practice and Digital Professionalism) and the existing guidance and legislation to avoid unauthorised, unethical or inappropriate actions or decisions that may infringe on people's human rights or that may be in breach of the professional standards.

Confidentiality and self-disclosure risks – self-disclosure and sharing personal information about ourselves is an important component of relationship-building and can be used to promote one's identity. However, personal information can also be manipulated and misused and can represent a source of vulnerability and harm. Social workers should discuss and explore these issues with young people and their parents and aim to establish a shared understanding about healthy and developmentally-appropriate balance for information sharing and self-disclosure. In discussion and agreement with the young person and/or their family, social workers should support children and families for the removal of any personal information that may be

Possession of inappropriate material
Although it is important to document online abuse (for example, by taking screenshots of cyberbullying messages), practitioners should know that sharing and viewing online abuse may perpetuate the abuse and revictimize those involved. Sharing, viewing or possessing indecent images of children is also a criminal offense; such images should not be included in referrals, emails or case notes.

inappropriate or any harmful or inappropriate online posts about the young person.

Connection and social capital – What are the connections and social network resources that the young person and their family can draw upon? Does the young person receive validation from their online activities? If yes, how? What is the young person's popularity, influence and social capital within their online and offline networks? Which networks or online platforms offer the young person the greatest social capital?

Social capital plays an important role in shaping people's relationships, identity and well-being both online and offline and is an important protective factor that enhances young people's resilience in managing online risks and overcoming adversity both online and offline. Therefore, social workers should consider young people's understanding of their online relationships, friendships and social capital. Furthermore, social workers should aim to understand the young person's approach developing their network and online connections and how the young person judges and chooses who to connect with and who to refuse? And why?

Research indicates that our number of social media friends and followers can influence one's own and others' perception of the person's identity, influence and social capital.

Context – understanding and assessing the online and offline context of the young person's life and experiences is essential for effective safeguarding. This includes learning about the social media platforms and digital devices the young person may use and their importance to the young person as well as the young person's view about relative risk associated with each platform. Practitioners can explore these questions and relevant issues in discussion with young people and their families and carers.

Content – what sort of content does the young person engage with and/or produce? Whereas producing and engaging with positive content can be a source of learning and development for the young person, harmful, extremist or developmentally-inappropriate content can be damaging and traumatic for the young person.

Content has a significant impact on young people's lives and experience and therefore, practitioners should explore the content produced by the young person with the young person and the family to ensure they are developmentally-appropriate for the young person and that they do not expose the young person to unnecessary risks or harm.

Young people's views & experiences
Although most young people are aware of the threats that strangers can pose, fewer young people are aware of peer grooming and exploitation by other young people. Many young people use digital technology as an extension of self and seamlessly navigate between online and offline experiences. Indeed, from studies and school work to friendships, online experiences are an integral part of young people's lives, identity and relationships. Practitioners should be cautious about restricting young people's digital access as this can result in exclusion and peer to peer abuse. Therefore, removing young people's digital access should be used as a last resort and for as short a time as necessary. Young people do not have equal access to digital technologies and the internet and this can be disempowering for young people. Indeed, digital inequalities are a new and important source of inequality that should be challenged and addressed by practitioners. Many young people find the approach by parents and professionals too risk focused and adult-centric and feel that adults do not understand their experiences and the importance of online engagement in their lives. Therefore, practitioners should adopt a developmentally-appropriate and child-centric approach in communicating and working with children and young people.

Contact (online / offline) – are there any contacts that are particularly helpful or harmful for the young person? Are these contacts online, offline or both? How does the young person think about that specific contact? Such contacts can be a potential source of support or harm. Therefore, understanding such information, especially from the young person's perspective is essential for supporting and safeguarding children and young people.

Conduct – what is the behaviour of the young person? Is the young person's behaviour a source of strength, risk, harm or concern? What are the young person's motivations and what is the young person's understanding of and explanation for their behaviour? An understanding of these and other similar questions are important for effective safeguarding of children and young people.

Compatibility and self-presentation/self-identity – People adjust their behaviours and self-presentation based on their identity and the context. For example, the young person may behave and present differently in school compared to home, or online versus offline, or when interacting with teachers versus interacting with friends and peers. Social workers should consider the differences and similarities between the young person's self-presentation and behaviour in different contexts and with different people. The similarities and differences and the compatibility or lack of compatibility between the young person's different behaviours and self-presentations can be explored with children and families and can offer valuable insight into young people's thoughts, self-narrative, identity and well-being. Practitioners should consider this information in conjunction with the young person's development and mental health.

Most people tend to present or emphasise certain characteristics or aspects of their experiences, identity or abilities online and this may be an exaggerated self-image and self-presentation. Such self-presentations may represent the person's aspirational goals and identities and may be reflective the person's priorities and preferred self-narrative. Understanding young people's current and preferred self-narratives and enabling and empowering the young person to rethink and re-author a validating and positive self-narrative are important for effective safeguarding and sustainable positive change in people's lives.

Consumption/use of digital – digital devices and online interactions are an important part of young people's every day experiences and therefore, in the same manner that practitioners ask about young people's daily routines, they should also inquire about and consider young people's online experiences and digital routine and their pattern of

Practice Example

Applying the framework: Sally, a 13-year-old girl has found her sexting messages and nude images have been shared without her consent.

Content: Understand and identify the content of sexting messages to assess and mitigate their impact.

Context: Which media or websites were/are used to share these messages and images? Are they openly accessible? What can you do to remove them?

Confidentiality and personal disclosure: What is the extent of the breach of confidentiality? Who can see or has access to these images now? There is a difference between these being shared among Sally's classmates compared to them being shared openly on the web. What other information is available about Sally online? If that information is also inappropriate, can it be removed and how?

Contact: Who was the original addressee of these messages/images? Who can be helpful at this time and who poses a risk to Sally?

Connection and social capital: What is Sally's social network and social capital and how have they been affected by these images? Sally's classmates can be an important source of support and resilience or vulnerability and abuse. Hence, it is important to collaboratively work with the school and involve Sally's classmates to raise their awareness and mitigate the risk of peer to peer abuse.

Conduct: Is there any inappropriate or abusive behaviour such as cyberbullying or sextortion?

Compatibility: How has this situation impacted Sally's behaviour and self-narrative? How can you support Sally to reauthor her self-narrative in more validating and empowering ways?

Consumption: Young people affected by online abuse often experience anxiety and tend to check online profiles and messages repeatedly. This can increase Sally's anxiety and result in loss of sleep and affect her mental and emotional wellbeing. How can Sally change her digital routine to better protect her mental health and wellbeing?

What are the complex and composite risks?

digital consumption. This includes questions around the apps the young person uses and why, and how frequently and for how long the young person uses those apps. Understanding the meaning and significance of young people's consumption/use of digital and their motivation for doing so are important for understanding the young people's preferences, experiences and mindset and for rechannelling their curiosity and energy and supporting and protecting their online and offline well-being.

Commercial, personal and/or professional value – online postings and activities may have commercial or professional value which can be used either positively or negatively. For example, online accounts or online postings such as blogs or videos may generate commercial value or may be used to promote personal or professional values or charitable causes.

Thinking about the impact
When thinking about online safeguarding practitioners should think about the above areas and consider the person's strengths and vulnerabilities in each of these areas and how they impact the young people's identity, relationship, development and wellbeing.
This offers a systematic approach to assessment and safeguarding that allows practitioners to draw on research evidence and practice experience in relation to each of these areas to mitigate online risks and harm and build upon the person's strengths and resilience.

Online accounts and postings may also be used in negative ways to exploit others, for examples, exploiting indecent images of children or other forms of sexual or criminal exploitation. Safeguarding children and families from negative commercial risks and supporting them to develop its positive potential can enhance their resilience and well-being and serve as a protective factor.

Composite and complex – recognising the complex nature of risk and harm, composite and complex risks refer to additional risks that are the result of the cumulative effect of multiple risks and their ramifications. For example, the cumulative effect of domestic abuse, mental health difficulties and alcohol misuse give rise to complex risks that are in addition to but different from each of those risks.

Each of the areas addressed above can be used positively to promote and support the young person's identity and development and enhance their resilience or can present risk of harm and result in negative outcomes. In effect, these areas offer a classification of online risks and resilience from a child-centred and safeguarding perspective and a positive approach to safeguarding children and young people online. A detailed consideration of the above factors can offer a holistic view of the young person's digital life and experiences. It provides a systematic approach to assessing online risks and harm, and supporting and safeguarding children and young people, their identity, relationships, and well-being.

A word of caution
Online connection and communication can facilitate self-disclosure and this means that children and families may find it easier to share their experiences via video conversation rather than face-to-face. Nonetheless, it is important that practitioners build an initial relationship through phone calls or door-step-visit to get to know the child better or when possible, to meet the child in-person. This makes the practitioner a known person and not a "stranger".
In the absence of such initial introduction and relationship-building process, there is the risk that online conversation with practitioners may normalise conversation with "strangers" and lead to the young person disclosing personal information to "strangers" online.

Framework for holistic assessment of children and families

The Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) provides a Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families while the assessment triangle highlights the main factors that influence children and young people's lives, development and well-being and lays the foundation for systematic assessment of needs and risks. Thinking about online risks and online harm and their impact on the child's identity, relationships and development, we can conceptually include online risks and resilience and the digital dimension of children and young people's experience to complement the assessment triangle as suggested in Figure 1. This offers a systematic and holistic approach for assessing children and families' needs and risks both online and offline.

| **Thinking about impact of Covid-19** |
|---|
| How has the young person been impacted in each of the areas of safeguarding in this guidance and how will s/he be impacted as we come out of the lockdown? What are the risks, challenges and opportunities associated with each of these? |
| Think about the risks and their impact in relation to the young person and each of the areas of safeguarding described in this guidance. |
| How has the context of the young person's life and experience been impacted by Covid-19 and how will it change as we exit lockdown? |
| What are the contact risks, conduct risks, connection and social capital risks, and so on for the young person? For example, during the lockdown there may have been reduced contact with people who may be a source harm or abuse. How will this change as we exit the lockdown? What can you do to mitigate these risks and their impact for the young person? |
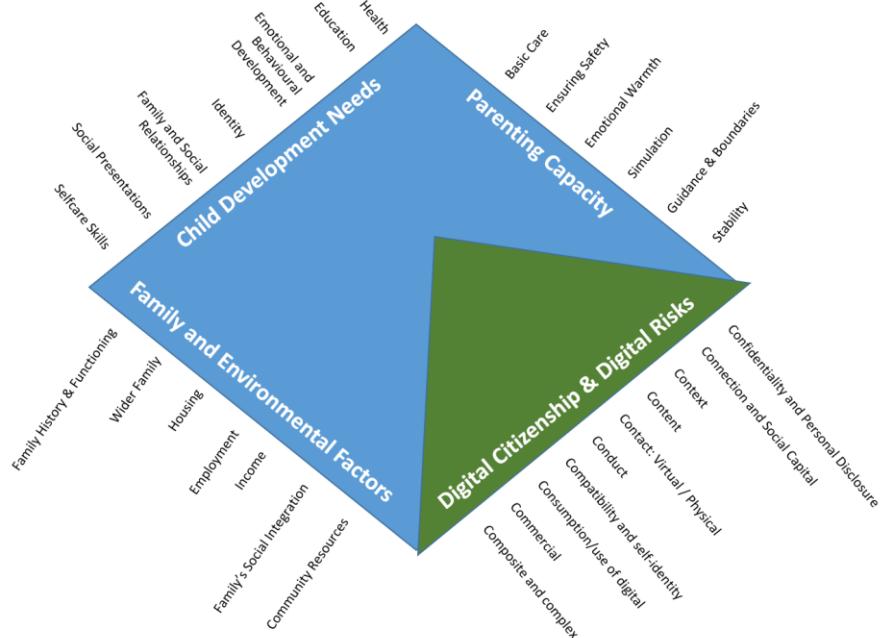
Figure 1: Digital risks and the Assessment Triangle

Practice tool for assessing online risks and resilience:

There is a wide range of helpful tools and resources that can be used in direct work with children and young people in a developmentally-appropriate manner to explore the experiences of young people and understand their priorities and perspective. Such tools can be used in conjunction with the framework in this guidance to assess and establish a shared understanding of online risks and harm, and to support and safeguard children and young people. Some of these tools are outlined in the PSW and Social Work England's Best Practice Guide for Direct Work with Children and Young People.

The following practice tool can be used together with young people and their families and carers in a reflective manner to explore and think about the areas of safeguarding outlined in this guide. Such reflective conversations can offer a better understanding of risks and needs, while raising young people's awareness of their strengths and vulnerabilities. It helps to establish shared understanding of risks, harm and resilience. By understanding the young person's and their parents' and carer's perspective and their priorities, practitioners can use motivational and relationship-based approaches to support young people's safety, well-being and development.
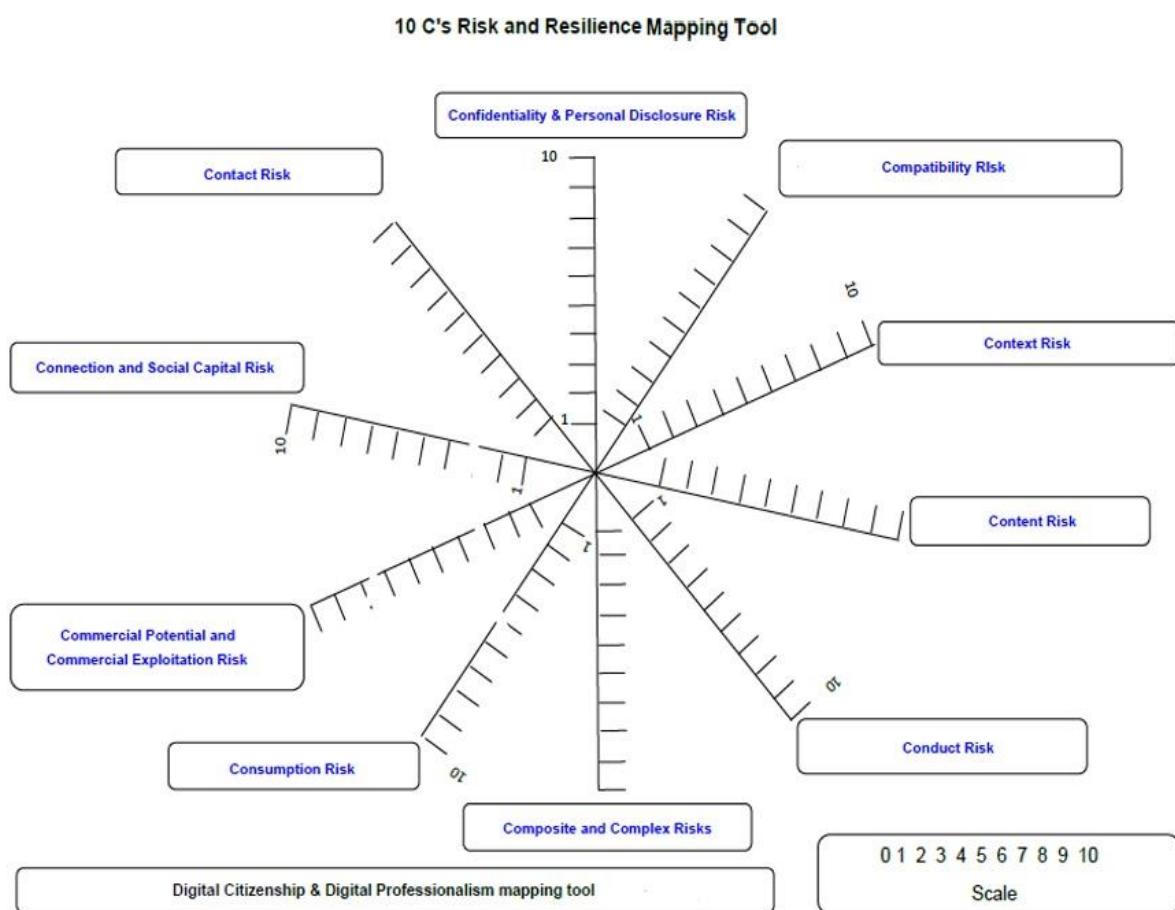
Figure 2: 10 Cs Risk and Resilience Mapping Tool

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From the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) Network and Social Work England, thank you for all that you do.

We hope this is guide is helpful and value your comments and feedback. Please address all feedback, comments or suggestions to Dr. Peter Buzzi at: PSWresearch@esafeguarding.org

For: **The PCFSW Research and Practice Development Project; and**
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This guidance has been developed as a matter of urgency and will be updated as needs be and in response to the changing circumstances. Therefore, please use the online document to ensure you have the most recent and up-to-date version.