The ‘virtuous’ cycle of parental empowerment: Partnering with parents to safeguard young people from exploitation


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The ‘virtuous’ cycle of parental empowerment: Partnering with parents to safeguard young people from exploitation

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Abstract
When young people are sexually exploited, parents and professionals alike can feel uncertain about how to balance the need to protect the child’s rights to agency and autonomy while also reducing the risk of harm. Despite the shared interest in keeping young people safe, there remains a substantial gap in the research literature about how practitioners engage parents to increase capacity to safeguard their children, particularly within the context of a child protection system ill-equipped to address forms of extrafamilial harm such as child sexual exploitation. This paper aims to contribute to understanding how professionals effectively engage parents by drawing upon evidence from research evaluations of two programmes in rural/urban North and urban South locations in England, both providing specialist support to parents/carers of sexually exploited children and young people. Through interrogating elements of effective support work evidenced across both programmes, a set of emerging key themes are presented, proposing that parent support and engagement can create a ‘virtuous’ cycle, whereby families are strengthened and are better able to protect their children from sexual exploitation and other forms of extrafamilial harm.

KEYWORDS
child sexual, exploitation, exploitation, extrafamilial harm, parenting, safeguarding

1 | INTRODUCTION
Child protection systems have developed across much of the world to protect and safeguard children and young people from abuse, with a particular focus on maltreatment happening in the private familial environment (Firmin, 2019). The attribution of causality and blame for harm occurring within individual families remains contested, as researchers (e.g., Featherstone et al., 2018) draw attention to the economic and cultural barriers faced by many families that come to attention of children’s services. Nevertheless, the family context is often where the potential for harm remains greatest for young children (Radford et al., 2011). As a result, the English child protection system is built around a legislative framework intended to protect children whose parents are harming them or failing to protect them from harm (Firmin, 2020). This is evident within the Children Act 1989, which stipulates that state intervention increases when ‘... the harm experienced by a child is, in some way, attributable to actions taken by their parents or carers’ (Firmin, 2020, p. 37). Thus, interventions, developed in a system dominated by discourses of risk within the context of individual families (Featherstone et al., 2018), have been designed over time with the ‘assumption that one or more of the parents and carers are failing or complicit’ if a child is abused (Jago et al., 2011, p. 35).

As children enter adolescence, they begin spending more time away from their homes and their parents/caregivers. Arguably most young people experience relative safety in these contexts (school, shopping malls, parks and public transport for example), but a minority...
are exposed to significant forms of harm and abuse (Radford et al., 2011). Statutory guidance in England now names types of extrafamilial harm, including many cases of child sexual exploitation (CSE), as among the forms of abuse children need protection from (Beckett & Walker, 2017), although the term ‘extra-familial harm’ may not be used by other nations within the UK. However, social workers, having been trained to identify and address harm within the family environment, have struggled to safeguard young people from extrafamilial harm (Firmin et al., 2016; Jago et al., 2011; Lefevre et al., 2018).

For example, in Hanson’s (2019) study of social workers’ understanding of agency and choice in the context of girls’ experiences of CSE, it was evident that participants viewed harm occurring outside the home as a markedly different experience than harm within the home. This dichotomised view of abuse within and outside the home environment, particularly in relation to CSE and other forms of child sexual abuse (Beckett & Walker, 2017), has made it challenging for social workers and other safeguarding professionals to (1) find ways of engaging with young people’s agency in the context of both intra- and extra-familial abuse (Lloyd, 2019) and (2) consider new ways of working with parents that do not focus entirely on addressing issues arising within the family home or context (Firmin, 2020). The challenge for professionals is then made more complex by the myriad manifestations of CSE (Beckett & Walker, 2017) and the relationship between child maltreatment, family difficulties, and CSE (Hanson, 2019). This is particularly true in relation to how professionals understand the limits of parental capacity to protect in instances where the harm that befalls their child happens outside their home, perpetrated by individuals or groups they may have no knowledge of or control over (Scott & McNeish, 2017).

The need to work with parents is acknowledged in recent government guidance for England, which states that any response to CSE should be ‘developed and informed by the involvement of a child’s family and carers whenever safe and appropriate’ (DfE, 2017, p. 13). For practitioners, this is not a straightforward task, further complicated by public and policy discourses that overemphasize the responsibility of parents in determining the degree to which young people are exposed to extrafamilial risk, as well as the practical realities of child protection work with those young people whose prior histories of familial abuse and neglect increase their risk of experiencing extrafamilial harm in adolescence (Hallet, 2017). This paper aims to engage with these issues by exploring how professionals can work effectively with parents to safeguard young people from CSE when it manifests as a form of extrafamilial harm and in situations where parents/carers are not the primary source of risk or harm.

2 THE NEED FOR PARENTAL SUPPORT IN CASES OF CHILD EXPLOITATION

Discovering that your child has been sexually abused can be an incredibly distressing experience for parents, resulting in mental health difficulties including post-traumatic stress disorder and/or depression (Elliott & Carnes, 2001). Experiencing high levels of distress can then make it difficult for parents to emotionally support their child or facilitate the child’s engagement in interventions designed to mitigate the traumatic impact of the abuse (Cohen & Mannarino, 1996; Elliott & Carnes, 2001). Research on intrafamilial child sexual abuse (CSA) indicates that social support from non-offending parents plays an influential role in a child’s adjustment following the abuse; for example, children victimized by CSA who feel supported by parents report higher feelings of self-worth and experience fewer behavioural difficulties compared to children who do not feel supported (Tremblay et al., 1999). Scapparelli and Kim (1995, p. 1179) found that girls victimized by CSA were also able to function much better in social/interpersonal and academic settings if they had a ‘warm and supportive relationship with a nonoffending parent’.

While the body of research on non-offending parents in the context of CSA indicates the importance of ensuring they are able to manage their own feelings of distress and engage supportively with their child, the research on parents’ experiences and support needs in situations of extrafamilial sexual abuse and exploitation remains limited. When children and young people experience extrafamilial risk and harm, both parents and professionals can be left feeling unable to manage their feelings of anxiety as they navigate child protection systems that have not been well-designed to safeguard children at risk of harm outside their family homes (Firmin, 2019). Because CSA perpetrators are most often people known to the child and/or family (McNeish & Scott, 2018), UK child protection systems (as well as those in other nations) and the professionals trained to work within them, begin with the assumption that parents play a significant role in either protecting from—or facilitating—the abuse of their child (Ward et al., 2014). This assumption reveals itself most clearly in assessments of parental capacity, which are at the core of child protection processes and require professionals to assess if parents are able to ‘resolve the problems that led to the children being at risk’ (Platt & Riches, 2016, p. 141). CSE is a form of CSA occurring when an individual or group ‘takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator’ (DfE, 2017, p. 5). It is often the case with extrafamilial forms of CSE, that perpetrators are not known to the parents or carers, making the nature of the risk harder to identify and understand (Firmin, 2018). These challenges are compounded when families lack the resources they need to create or experience safety.

We know that children from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds become victims of sexual exploitation, but it is also the case that perpetrators often exploit the vulnerabilities of children whose families are under various forms of strain (Pearce, 2014).

In order to successfully engage parents, help them access, build and use social capital, increase their resilience and capacity to safeguard their children from further extrafamilial harm, professionals need to understand parents’ experiences and feel equipped with the requisite skills for engaging with them as partners in safeguarding. Drawing on findings from research evaluations of two programmes in different geographic locations in England (rural and urban), using
different models of parental support and engagement for parents of children victimized by CSE, this paper aims to add to the scant international research on parents’ experiences of having a child victimized by sexual exploitation and approaches to effectively supporting them. It then aims to present key themes conceptualized as a ‘virtuous’ circle in which different elements of support work together to create a context where parents are better able to safeguard their own children.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the combined findings of two evaluation research studies examining the effectiveness of parent support programmes provided in London (2017–2018) and Lancashire, England (2014–2017). Both studies received ethical approval from university research ethics committees (University of Sussex for Study 1 and University of Bedfordshire for Study 2).

3.1 | Study and data overview

The first study was conducted by the first author and examined the effectiveness of a new parent support project delivered by a London-based charity across three London boroughs (Hickle, 2018). The project aimed to deliver 3 months of trauma-informed, psychoeducational intensive one-to-one support with parents/carers whose children were known to be victimized by sexual exploitation—an approach modelled on their work with young people at risk of CSE. It was delivered alongside a similarly structured support programme for young people, though they remained open to referrals for caregivers whose children were not receiving support. The evaluation was co-designed as a realist action research project (Westhorp et al., 2016) seeking to identify how change happens, for whom and in what contexts, and addressing real-world problems through a cycle of experimentation. The work took place over 18 months in 2017–2018, involving project support workers, managers, and multidisciplinary colleagues from the three London boroughs where the project was provided.

The aim of the evaluation was to examine the effectiveness of this new support model (i.e., for whom, and in what contexts, it might work). Four project meetings were held throughout the evaluation period and each meeting began with a reflective writing task to help participants focus and begin reflecting on the work and subsequently taking action on the discussion that surfaced within the meetings. Participants gave permission for their written reflections to be included in the data, which helped contextualize the other sources of data including interviews with parents and young people, a focus group with parents, evaluation forms collected at the end of the 3 months’ support, and evaluation forms collected from multidisciplinary professionals who attended trainings provided by support project workers on how to effectively work with parents and carers when their child is at risk of exploitation (see Table 1).

The second study was conducted by the second author and evaluated the work of a Parent Liaison Officer (PLO) placed in a multiagency team, which was based in Lancashire and worked to disrupt abuse, convict perpetrators and protect children who are at risk of CSE (Shuker & Ackerley, 2017). The PLO offered flexible, one-to-one support to parents and families whose child was at risk, or a victim, of child sexual exploitation (CSE) using the ‘relational safeguarding model’ developed by the organization. The model is described as ‘Professionals working in partnership with parents, facilitating and supporting them, in order to maximise the ability and capacity of statutory agencies and families to safeguard a child at risk of/being sexually exploited’. The aims of the evaluation were to explore the impact of the PLO in relation to three key outcomes for parents: increased awareness and understanding of CSE; playing a more active part in safeguarding their child and receipt of support through the judicial process. The PLO provided one-to-one support to 63 parents from 2015 to 16, the 2 years covered by the evaluation. Thirty of these gave their initial consent to be contacted about the evaluation and 10 went on to take part in an interview. The evaluation gathered quantitative data from evaluation forms and qualitative data from interviews, observations and a focus group (see Table 2).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Study 1 data</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Data source</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured individual interviews</td>
<td>6 parents and 3 young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>9 parents/foster carers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service evaluation forms</td>
<td>29 parents/carers</td>
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<td>Professional trainings evaluation forms</td>
<td>58 multidisciplinary professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionals’ written accounts of their practice</td>
<td>21 written reflective pieces from multidisciplinary professionals attending evaluation project meetings</td>
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<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Study 2 data</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Data source</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured individual interviews</td>
<td>10 parents; 11 multidisciplinary professionals; 3 parent liaison officers</td>
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<td>Focus group</td>
<td>4 parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service evaluation forms</td>
<td>17 parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting observations</td>
<td>3 observations of multidisciplinary team briefings and meetings</td>
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^Detective Sergeant (1), Detective Constable (2), Police Constable (1), Safeguarding Nurse—NHS (2), Sexual Health Worker—Brook (1), Missing from Home Coordinator, Police (1), Young People’s Worker—Children’s Social Care (1), Children’s Social Care Manager (2).
3.2 | Limitations

Each study faced challenges during data collection that resulted in limitations to the methodology. Staff turnover had an impact on data collection in both studies, and the samples in both were self-selecting; thus, they are likely to include parents who have had a more positive experience of support, skewing our understanding away from the parents for whom this support did not work as well. Both studies also only include biological parents and did not include extended family or foster carers. Only three young people participated in Study 1 and none in Study two; this analysis is therefore limited to insight gathered from professionals and parents (with direct quotations from young people occasionally drawn upon for context). Services provided to parents by support workers were not provided in isolation and any impact of the support work cannot be separated entirely from other support they may have received within the organizations or the wider system (e.g., children's services). Finally, Study 1 took place over 18 months and Study 2 over 2 years, so we are unable to comment on the long-term impact of the support or safeguarding outcomes (i.e., related to children's services or criminal justice involvement).

3.3 | Analysis

Focus group and interviews in Study 1 and 2 were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically using NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software package. For both studies this involved a process of generating initial codes and then identifying, reviewing, and refining themes. In each instance, themes were developed both inductively and based upon the outcomes each project was seeking to achieve and what was known from existing research regarding effective parent support. In Study 1, evaluation forms provided by parents and professionals included a number of open-ended questions so that participants could provide their own impromptu responses; however responses on the evaluations for both parents and professionals were relatively brief, which enabled thematic analysis and the creation of quantified response categories. Both studies took a mixed-methods approach that involved triangulating accounts from different people (including professionals and parents) as well as data from different sources (surveys, documents and interviews). The purpose of using these different methods in each study was to explore and integrate multiple perspectives into a more comprehensive and nuanced account of each project and its impact.

Having encountered each other's work through our professional networks, and recognized the similarities between the evaluations, we (the authors) systematically reviewed the findings of each evaluation, reading our own and each other’s reports to identify key commonalities and differences. It was clear that both studies recorded very similar outcomes and identified mechanisms of change that worked in similar ways, across the different contexts. The core outcomes described in both studies were improvements in parents': knowledge of CSE; empowerment and safeguarding capacity; emotional resilience; relationship with their child and relationships with professionals. These outcomes were not always presented in the same way, in part because those who commissioned each evaluation had slightly different aims (for example Study 2 also reported on the impact of parent support on family engagement in court cases, to reflect the specific support they provide in this area).

Having discussed the findings of our separate reviews, we then considered a theory of change drafted by the second author after completing the Study 2 evaluation (Shuker & Ackerley, 2017), and how it should be adapted in light of the findings of both evaluations. This short discussion paper employed the concept of a 'virtuous' cycle to conceptualize a positive trajectory in which families are strengthened and the risk of further harm caused by extrafamilial risk and harm is mitigated. In our discussions, we contrasted this with the concept of a 'vicious' cycle of parental disempowerment, where parents can experience confusion, are disenfranchised from professional responses and decision-making processes related to safeguarding their child, and feel overwhelmed and/or unable to cope (Palmer & Jenkins, 2014). The cumulative evidence from both evaluation studies was utilized to interrogate and refine these ideas for understanding the impact of support for parents.

The logic of a ‘virtuous’ or ‘vicious’ cycle draws from behaviour confirmation theory (Snyder, 1984), in which one party’s expectation or treatment of the other produces reactions that confirm the original belief, as well as theories that explain how the process of ‘labelling’ creates the very outcomes that labels attempt to describe (Becker, 1963). The concept of cycles helps to highlight the systemic nature of risk and safety, and the significance of beliefs about and relationships between parents, their children, other agencies and the perpetrator/s, in addressing CSE. Here, Beckett et al. (2017) identify three conditions that make CSE possible: perpetrator risk; the vulnerability of the child, and inadequate protective structures. Abuse only ever occurs because a perpetrator takes advantage of a child’s vulnerability. So, while this paper focuses on how supporting the family is a vital part of safeguarding, this work should never be at the expense of efforts to stop perpetrators or imply that parents are in any way responsible for the abuse. Instead the logic of a ‘virtuous’ cycle can help us recognize how professional beliefs about the role of parents in CSE cases, and parents beliefs about themselves and their child can all powerfully affect a child’s life and safety. When belief in parental capacity is appropriately reinforced among families and professionals, it can create a more effective context for safeguarding and vice versa.

4 | THE THREE EVALUATION OUTCOMES

In this section, data will be presented from both studies as they relate to the three overarching outcomes for parents that were evidenced within the evaluations: improved understanding and skills for safeguarding, increased emotional resilience and improved relationships with children and with professionals. Following this, we present a series of key themes, integrating evidence from both evaluations that suggests how these outcomes might relate to each other, acting as mechanisms of change that can create a ‘virtuous’ cycle for parents.
4.1 | Increased understanding and skills for safeguarding

Parenting children or young people who have been, or remain at ongoing risk of CSE requires the development of new knowledge and skills, which specialist support workers across both programmes sought to provide. Upon completing their involvement with workers in Study 1, parents completed service evaluations that asked open-ended questions about their experience in the project. Half of the 29 parents (n = 15) completing evaluations mentioned education about CSE as both a top priority at the outset of service engagement and a key benefit to engaging in services. In service evaluations collected in Study 2 (n = 17), all parents reported that engaging with the service helped them to understand how CSE affected their child. In interviews across both studies, parents spoke of learning about the dynamics of CSE, including the grooming tactics perpetrators might use, and the ways in which they may have manipulated or tried to control their child. This re-framing of their child’s experience helped them to locate blame with the perpetrator and/or extrafamilial context and not with their child. A parent (interview, Study 1) explained that before meeting her support worker, she felt helpless in her ability to participate in safeguarding her child: the parent ‘would just curl up into a ball and sit back and let it happen’. The knowledge and skills gained through engaging with her support worker had made a difference: ‘I am more up front and more shoulders back and stop that happening…now I feel I am back in control’. A parent (interview, Study 2) described similar feelings of confidence, as they reported understanding how to fight ‘to get the child back’.

Support workers facilitated this new knowledge by introducing practical activities and tools parents could use with their teenage children, rehearsing scenarios so that parents could begin finding new ways to think about and respond to their child’s experiences and behaviours, and being flexible and available to pick up the phone when a parent felt unable to respond appropriately to their child in a challenging moment (e.g., when a child came home late or acted aggressively towards family members). For example, a parent (interview, Study 2) said: ‘At the beginning my daughter would walk all over us. We were trying to keep the peace with her. We’d phone [support worker] up and ask her for advice, even on like the small things of parenting’. Increased knowledge and skills helped parents provide clearer boundaries in the home, achieve a greater sense of control over what happened in the home, and increased their expectations of being treated as partners in the safeguarding process. As a result of her mother’s engagement with a support worker, one young person (interview, Study 1) described her mother as more ‘understanding but also strict—which is good; it’s better that she’s strict’.

4.2 | Increased emotional resilience

Across both studies, parents reported that an increase in knowledge and skills was associated with increased confidence, enabling them to feel calmer, more relaxed, and ‘a bit lighter’ (parent interview, Study 1). For many, parenting a child victimized by CSE left them feeling isolated, stigmatized and ashamed. This was particularly difficult for parents whose own prior experiences of abuse and exploitation resulted in them also feeling triggered as they became aware of the extent of their child’s victimization. More generally, professionals described observing parents’ physical and mental health decline, and in both studies they described instances in which parents lost their jobs as they attempted to balance ever-increasing demands on their time from children’s social care with inflexible and/or precarious work environments. Some described a sense of losing their identity as people and as parents, and for example a parent in Study 1 explained: ‘It changes who you are completely’. A professional (written reflection, Study 1) similarly recalled: ‘I’ve seen parents become this CSE person’, that is, someone whose life had become utterly dominated by the abuse.

Using a non-judgemental interpersonal style, support workers helped reduce parents’ feelings of isolation, shame and stigma. For example, in Study 1, parents remarked during interviews ‘I understand that we’re not alone’ and ‘other people out there are going through it as well’ while another parent (interview, Study 2) shared that the support ‘…just sort of changed everything for us and made us think that we weren’t on our own and it wasn’t our fault’; ‘I could have easily, yeah crumbled with the guilt and things like that but because [of support worker] I don’t feel guilty because I know that it’s nothing that I’ve done or said’. In Study 1, only three of the 29 parents who returned evaluation forms wrote about the desire for emotional support when they initially engaged with services; however, over half (n = 15) wrote that emotional support was among the most important benefits after having engaged with the service. Some parents described gaining strength and encouragement, and the will to carry on supporting their child through the challenging context of court proceedings and/or a trial against their child’s perpetrator: ‘She made such a big difference in my life; I couldn’t have done it [attend court] without her’ (interview, Study 2). In these instances, increased resilience made it possible for parents to engage proactively with their children and the safeguarding process.

4.3 | Improved relationships

4.3.1 | Children

The strain of exploitation in general takes its toll on parent–child relationships: ‘You just want to fight and you forget about the protecting … and you are not putting that cloak around your daughter to say, “Come on, you have gone through this, let’s try and sort it out”’ (parent interview, Study 1). Through the one-to-one support they received, some parents reported feeling calmer and more relaxed, with several describing spending increased time with their children and making concerted efforts to show love and affection. Parents who submitted evaluations in Study 1 (n = 29) were asked about the key benefits of support: 16 describing better communication with their child; 7 indicated they better understood how to meet their child’s needs; and 5 described a stronger relationship with their child.
A young person interviewed for Study 1 described what this felt like from her perspective:

My mum will come to my room and say like, ‘okay we are going out and we are going to sit down and talk and have girlie time and see if there is anything you need to talk to me about or I want to talk to you about or anything at all so we can just have that time together just to be out and in the open’. And that is really, really good because it just gives me time to breathe.

The impact of improved relationships was manifold. In interviews, parents commonly described how a new understanding of their child’s experience as a victim of CSE helped them to respond and react with more patience. In many situations, their renewed confidence to spot signs of grooming and abuse and set boundaries was described as a mechanism for developing necessary structure within the home that was seen to enhance the safeguarding capacity of the family context. For example, in the case of one family, renewed parental confidence helped create greater parental control: ‘We seem to have lost all confidence ... [the worker] sort of went from the beginning she said, ‘You need to take control back’ and that’s what we did’ (parent interview, Study 2). While the parents in each study shared positive examples of improved relationships, we should be cautious in extrapolating meaning without the inclusion of more young people’s perspectives in this analysis. For example, prior research with young people affected by CSE (e.g., Hallet, 2017) illuminates the role of complex family dynamics, including instability, and feeling unable to trust or be cared for by family, as an antecedent to experiencing harm outside the family home (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022).

4.3.2 | Professionals

Finally, parents described the positive impact of working with support workers in each study and professionals reported changes in their perspective of parents’ experiences, resulting in more effective working relationships. In interviews, parents spoke of support workers helping them navigate the complexities of the system. This was expressed in accompanying them to meetings, passing along their concerns to other relevant professionals, and offering bespoke advice: ‘I had a go-to person and I could ask, ‘What should I do? Should I actually call the police? Should I call social services? It was almost like I had a reference point I had where I could just pick up the phone and speak to a person’ (parent interview, Study 1). In this example, the parent was emotionally supported in a stressful moment while also being coached to understand when and how to engage with other professionals; a key skill developed by parents across both studies. A parent (interview, Study 2) explained: ‘When there was any information obviously about the things the girls were doing, I was passing everything to her [support worker] and she was passing it to the police. She was telling me how to log everything, how to get as much things across as possible and every single bit of information to give it to try and keep the girls safe’. Increased information sharing both to the support worker and directly to other professionals was reported to facilitate greater trust between parents and the wider safeguarding system. Parents also spoke of the characteristics and the practice skills of support workers that helped build trust. They described having close positive relationships with someone who was skilled and knowledgeable, non-judgemental, and containing. They also referenced the importance of a flexible and responsive approach; echoing the professional skills identified as important for working with young people at risk of sexual exploitation (Lefevre et al., 2017). Several parents (interviews, Study 1) positively described workers’ use of self, as their personalities, demeanour, and life experience all played pivotal roles in facilitating trust.

Improved relationships with professionals were bi-directional; whereas initially parents lacked an understanding of how to engage with professionals and navigate the complex context of myriad systems they represented, professionals explained that they lacked an understanding of how parents experienced having a child victimized by sexual exploitation. Evaluations provided by professionals who underwent training in Study 1 (n = 42) indicate that learning about parents experiences enabled them to better understand the impact of CSE on the wider family and the value of working with parents as partners in safeguarding. This improved understanding led to positive outcomes in practice. For example, in Study 2, a professional described in an interview how working with a Parent Liaison Officer had ‘brought the voice of the parents to the table of every case’ and as a result police officers had learned to always involve the family: ‘that’s the biggest thing I’ve learnt from [them], without a shadow of a doubt’. When professionals understood parents better, they were able to elicit information from them about what was happening in the family or home environment, resulting in more informed decision-making as it related to safeguarding needs, parental capacity, and ongoing investigations.

4.4 | ‘Virtuous’ cycles

Having evidenced the four main outcomes achieved by parent support workers we propose a conceptual framework that captures a possible relationship between them, using the concept of a ‘virtuous’ cycle of ‘parental empowerment’. Figure 1 illustrates the logic of a ‘virtuous’ cycle to show how each of the outcomes described in our findings might relate, and together create an upward spiral through which the family environment, or parent-child relationship, is strengthened. Theoretically, we are describing a causal sequence in which each outcome (displayed in the blue circles in Figure 1) triggers mechanisms of change that create the next outcome (blue text between each outcome, Pawson & Tilley, 1997). However, this remains an emerging set of key themes which we believe illuminate the relationships between outcomes, rather than claiming that this cycle occurs in every case where parents are supported.

4.4.1 | Improved understanding of CSE and skills for safeguarding

Our evaluations demonstrated the importance of professionals taking the time to explain what CSE actually is, including the ways
perpetrators and exploitative peers/groups cause harm. If parents understand how children become groomed or exploited they are able to place responsibility for the abuse with the perpetrator(s) or the context in which the abuse occurred. They can make sense of their child's behaviour, and come to see that neither they, nor their child, are to blame. Parent support workers in both studies also went further than providing information and actually equipped parents with strategies to take protective action, including how to share information with the police, manage the abused children’s difficult behaviour and even store potential evidence correctly in case it could be used in a criminal trial. By treating parents as partners and sharing new information about their child's case, parent support workers empowered parents to take protective action.

4.4.3 Improved relationships with child and safeguarding system

Both evaluations gathered evidence of improved relationships within the family, as a result of the support offered to parents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents who can make sense of their child's behaviour, are empowered to protect and are given emotional support to cope, report the positive impact on their relationship with their children. Parent support workers also act directly to help parents understand, navigate and participate in the services and systems involved in their child's case—all of which can improve parental relationships with a range of agencies. This support presupposes that parents are a crucial resource in the protection of children and adolescents from sexual exploitation and that parents have capacity to safeguard their child unless there is evidence to the contrary (in accordance with statutory guidance, for example, Department for Education, 2018). As this support helps parents manage their child's behaviour and meet their needs, it is more likely that other professionals (evidenced in Study 1 surveys) recognize the positive impact of involving parents and that the cycle continues.

5 DISCUSSION

Although small in scale, the findings of these two evaluations provide some evidence that parents should be given targeted support when their child is at risk, or a victim, of sexual exploitation. Having described the main outcomes identified across both evaluations, we suggest that they are not discrete but are likely to interact to strengthen the family system. Arguably, professionals will find it easier to include more knowledgeable, empowered and resilient parents as partners in safeguarding responses. This inclusion will mean parents...
are privy to more information, trusted further to co-develop safeguarding strategies and have access to more emotional support from professionals. The reverse may also be true. Families that are weakened by disempowerment and exclusion may become less able to act protectively towards the child, which will decrease the likelihood that parents are treated as partners. For example, those who struggle to parent their children when perpetrators or exploitative peers use methods of control (e.g., emotionally blackmailing children, threatening them, using secret phones or monitoring their movements, Berelowitz et al., 2013, Unwin & Stephens-Lewis, 2016) can be left feeling confused and disempowered, misunderstanding why their children act secretly or have stopped talking or listening to them. Parents may then blame themselves or their child (Kosaraju, 2008; Shuker & Ackerley, 2017). Beyond knowledge of the abuse itself, parents then have to manage contact with police, social services and other agencies, and some then have to support their child through a court case as well (Kosaraju, 2008; Palmer & Jenkins, 2014; Shuker & Ackerley, 2017). This confusion, disempowerment and emotional turmoil can be compounded where professionals do not share information, do not include parents in safeguarding plans and ultimately view parents as lacking capacity to protect their child. This can result in the opposite of a virtuous cycle—perhaps a ‘vicious’ cycle, or negative feedback loop increasing distrust between parents and professionals, leaving parents less equipped to protect their child, and ultimately undermining the child’s safety. There is, therefore, direct and practical value in taking a strength-based approach to parents from the start, rather than a posture that focuses solely on assessing the family’s capacity to protect.

It is important to note that these evaluations focused on outcomes for parents, and only indirectly theorized the impact of parental support on child safety and well-being. Nevertheless, previous research has attributed the following outcomes to support for families impacted by CSE (Palmer & Jenkins, 2014; Scott et al., 2017; Scott & McNeish, 2017; Shuker & Ackerley, 2017):

- Increased trust between parents and children, which in turn increases the chances of children disclosing their experiences and enables better safeguarding
- Enhanced professional assessment and planning, as services draw on more accurate information about the child, their family situation and the risks they face
- Reduced strain on the family, which can result in fewer children going missing, fewer children being taken into care and greater placement stability.

The value of presenting this ‘virtuous’ cycle is in describing the ways that professional attitudes/actions affect parental beliefs/behaviours and the safeguarding potential of familial relationships. However, we recognize that such models are also simplistic and linear; unable to fully capture the complexity of families’ experiences of CSE. In practice, these positive outcomes occur simultaneously to some extent, and there are other forms of support (e.g., peer support from other parents, practical and economic support when necessary, challenging unjust, discriminatory, and oppressive structures) that are contributing factors. Parents bring different resources and levels of resilience to the situations they face, and the impact of parental support will differ accordingly. Elements of the ‘virtuous’ cycle might therefore need to be amended for different groups of parents, whose needs vary. For example, it may be that this concept has particular resonance in cases of CSE where children have been groomed or are entrenched in serious and on-going exploitative relationships or peer networks. Context fundamentally affects whether particular mechanisms of change are triggered, and in turn whether outcomes are achieved (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and this paper should therefore be read alongside other evidence. Furthermore, because causal relationships between outcomes are theorized rather than evidenced, there is a need for this concept of a ‘virtuous’ cycle to be tested by researchers in the future who might also explore the applicability of this concept to other forms of extrafamilial risk and harm, such as criminal exploitation.

The evaluations suggest that specific and tailored support, focused on information, empowerment emotional support and navigating systems, is of real value to parents in cases of CSE. But even where this is not possible, any professional can contribute to the creation of a ‘virtuous’ cycle in how they perceive and interact with parents. We have argued that professionals’ attitudes and responses to parents can have an indirect but significant impact on a child’s safety in CSE cases, and a strength-based approach could initiate the development of a ‘virtuous’ cycle where parents can truly become partners in safeguarding.

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**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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**ENDNOTES**

1 In cases of CSE, there are often indicators that a young person is being controlled or abused, but there may not be clear evidence or disclosure. Therefore, services have to work with young people who they describe as ‘at risk’ until abuse is known. In practice this means there is not always a significant difference between these two categories, when it comes to models of support.

2 The use of these terms should not be taken to imply any moral judgement of parents or professionals. These terms are employed here because they are widely understood to refer to feedback loops that are positively or negatively reinforcing.
3 Service evaluations included a series of open-ended questions to which parents provided imputative responses rather than responded to pre-determined (e.g., agree or disagree) items.

4 The exposure of a ‘grooming’ relationship is not a pre-requisite for challenging victim or parent blame, and the information parents were given potentially implies a more narrow ‘grooming’ model of CSE. However, we do not know what type of exploitation each family experienced, and much of this information would be relevant beyond that model, for example, how young people can be controlled or manipulated, barriers to disclosure, or how trauma affects young people’s presentation or relationships.

5 In Study 2, five of the professionals interviewed identified parent support as a key driver of the multi-agency team’s very strong track record of family/child attendance in court.

REFERENCES


