Virtuous Circles

Theorising the impact of Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation (Pace)

Discussion paper

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1. Introduction

'Parents against child sexual exploitation' (Pace) is a charity that supports the parents and carers of children who are, or are at risk of being, sexually exploited by perpetrators external to the family. Between 2014-17 Pace delivered the grant-funded project 'Parents as partners in safeguarding children and young people in Lancashire', which centred around the work of a Parent Liaison Officer (PLO) placed in the multi-agency 'Engage' child sexual exploitation (CSE) team in East Lancashire.[1] The project was evaluated by the 'International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking' (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire.[2] Our evaluation (Shuker and Ackerley, 2017) confirmed the findings of other evaluations of the work of Pace in demonstrating that the PLO contributed to positive outcomes for both parents and professional partners. The evaluation also highlighted the scope for the 'relational safeguarding model' used in the project to be developed further through a clearer articulation of the links between the PLO's activities and the outcomes they achieved.

This discussion paper aims to support that process by reviewing three of the key outcomes achieved by the PLO (increased parental understanding, empowerment and resilience) and suggesting that together they create a virtuous circle. In the model of a virtuous circle, the PLO's support for parents improves outcomes, which in turn can have a positive impact on professionals' interactions with the family and relationships within the home – both of which continue to reinforce positive outcomes for parents and their children. At its simplest, this theory of change asserts that when the family unit is strengthened, parents and other family members are empowered to work alongside statutory agencies to safeguard the child.[3]

Parent Liaison Officer key outcomes

Understanding

"You can understand it more, because you thought, 'Why should I put up with it?...Why did she let him do this? Why did she not just come back to us and tell us?' So yes, you can understand the hold that he had on her and she was so scared of him that she was scared to tell us. She used to turn to drink and it's a fear factor as well, but she (PLO) helped us understand why she did what she did."

Empowerment

"At the beginning my daughter would walk all over us. We were trying to keep the peace with her. We'd phone (the PLO) up and ask her for advice, even on like the small things of parenting. We seem to have lost all confidence… (The PLO) sort of went from the beginning she said, 'You need to take control back' and that's what we did."

Resilience

"There's sometimes like if my daughter's cutting herself or something, I can't handle it. Then I'll ring them and I'll say, 'I just can't handle it.' They'll come down; they'll talk to me, you know calm me down. Then if I need to be referred anywhere they'll refer me. But they'll always put a positive thing in my mind that I can do it… I find my mind going, 'I'm not going to give up, I'm not getting depression'."

All quotes taken from Shuker and Ackerley (2017)

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1. The project was funded by Comic Relief.

2. Shuker, L with Ackerley, E (2017) Empowering Parents: Evaluation of Parents as partners in safeguarding children and young people in Lancashire project 2014 – 2017. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

3. Although this paper refers to 'parents' it is equally applicable to other family members with caring responsibility, and carers of looked after children.

Other publications are available that focus on the activities, principles of practice and impact of Pace and/or parent support work in CSE cases (see Pace, 2014; Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Shuker and Ackerley 2017; Scott and McNeish, 2017). This paper focuses only on the logic and behavioural mechanisms underpinning such work and should not be read in isolation from the evidence contained in these other documents. I hope that by synthesising some of the key themes emerging from research and evaluation commissioned or undertaken by Pace, our understanding of the impact of parent support work will be advanced.

2. The need for parent support

Guidance and reviews advocate for parents to be treated as partners in safeguarding (Munro, 2011) and for strength-based approaches to be used in family and parent support work (Smith and Davis, 2010). Nevertheless, the child protection system was designed primarily to protect younger children from harm experienced within the family environment. Jago et al (2011:35) write that 'interventions designed to protect young children from neglect and abuse in the home are based on time limits, thresholds for intervention and an inherent assumption that one or more of the parents and carers are failing or complicit'. A number of evaluations of Pace have highlighted that families do experience suspicion from statutory services, despite growing awareness of their support needs (Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Pace, 2016; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017).

While evidence of the impact of CSE on parents and families is still emerging, there is increasing recognition that parents and other family members are significantly affected by the sexual exploitation of children, and therefore have their own support needs. These needs are acknowledged in government guidance on CSE.

"It is crucial to work with them [parents/carers] not only to assess the risks of harm faced by the young person or child but to help them understand what the young person has experienced, the risks they face and how they can be supported and protected. The parents may need direct support and help to improve family relationships and keep their child safe."

(DfE, 2017:14)

A series of projects have been undertaken in the last five years, aiming to work with parents, carers and families as part of a more holistic response to CSE. These include the Safe Accommodation Project (Shuker, 2013), Families and Communities Against CSE (D'Arcy et al, 2015), and DfE innovation fund projects in South Yorkshire and Greater Manchester (Scott, 2017; Scott and Botcherby, 2017). A review of all the DfE innovation projects focused on CSE found that provision of support to family members and a focus on empowering young people and families were common elements of successful projects (Luke et al, 2017). The authors advised that services should offer training and support to families/carers that increases their understanding of CSE and provide ongoing support through home visits and/or telephone contacts. An evidence review on supporting parents of sexually exploited young people concluded that support for parents should have greater priority, and be flexible, strength-based, build resilience and support parents' relationship with their child and other services (Scott and McNeish, 2017).

3. Pace and the relational safeguarding model

Growing awareness of parents' needs has largely been attributed to the work of Pace, which has been advocating for parents affected by CSE since 1996 (Palmer and Jenkins, 2013). Over time Pace has developed and articulated an approach for working with families called 'relational safeguarding'. The model is defined 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' (Pace, 2014:8). In the same publication it states that the relational safeguarding model focuses on:

- 'Maximising the capacity of parents and carers to safeguard their children and contribute to the prevention of abuse and the disruption and conviction of perpetrators
- Early intervention and prevention
- Enabling family involvement in safeguarding processes around the child, including decision making
- Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the family in recognition of the impact of CSE.
- Balancing the child's identity as both an individual and as part of a family unit.' (Pace, 2014:8)

The relational safeguarding model is contrasted with approaches to child protection that focus on assessing and investigating parents, and which assume that they 'may be partly responsible for the abuse that a child is experiencing' (Pace, 2014:8). Instead the model assumes that parents want to, and have the capacity to, protect their child unless there is evidence to the contrary. This approach acknowledges the significant strain that sexual exploitation places on families, and responds by empowering parents to be partners in safeguarding their child alongside professional agencies such as children's social care and the police.

4. Key outcomes: understanding, empowerment, resilience

The impact of CSE on families has been outlined in detail elsewhere (Palmer and Jenkins, 2013; Unwin and Stephens-Lewis, 2016; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017; Scott and McNeish, 2017), but includes poor physical and mental health, emotional stress/trauma and social isolation. Parents need help managing the agencies that are involved in their child's case, as well as specific support in engaging with police investigations and court cases. A Pace PLO offers flexible, one-to-one support to parents and families using the relational safeguarding model in order to help meet their support needs.

Our recent evaluation (Shuker and Ackerley, 2017) aimed to understand the impact of the PLO in relation to three 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. Once underway, evaluation data also highlighted the impact of the PLO in increasing parents' emotional resilience, and it was understanding, empowerment and resilience that were then identified as the three key outcomes the PLO achieved for parents (see Figure 1 and the full evaluation report for supporting evidence).[4]

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4. PLOs work with parents to co-create safety plans that identify the actions that parents can take to protect their child e.g. reporting the child missing or recording any identifying information for new associates who are causing concern

Figure 1: Outcomes achieved for parents (Shuker and Ackerley, 2017)
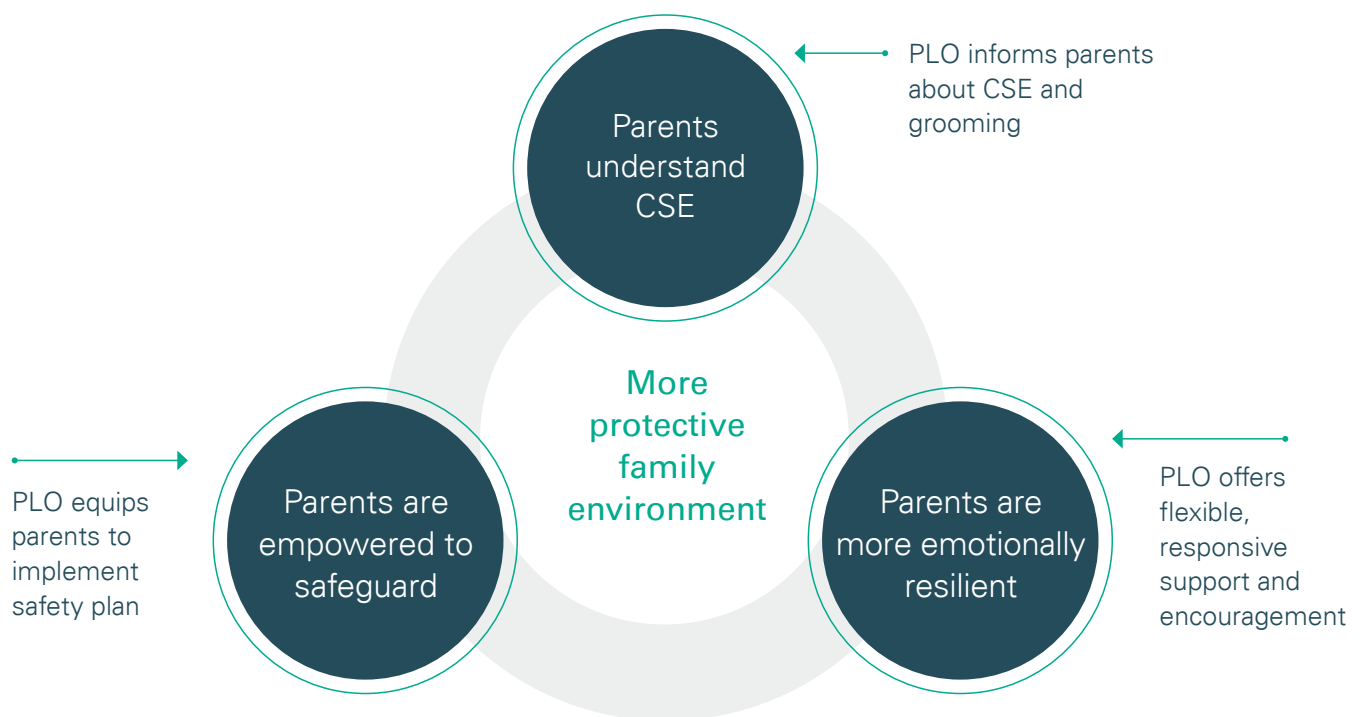
It was beyond the scope of the initial evaluation to explore the relationships between these outcomes, but there was data to suggest that they were causally linked. For example, some interviewees suggested that understanding grooming helps parents not to blame themselves for their child's situation, which in turn creates greater emotional resilience to the impact of the abuse. Of the professionals we interviewed, it was those with the most experience of parent support in CSE cases who commented most frequently on the relationship between the PLO's activities and different outcomes. The following examples are all narratives taken from these interviews.

1. When parents stop blaming themselves for what they see is happening with their child, some of their confidence as parents is restored. This in turn helps them to build a more consistent and safe environment for their child.

2. Parents' confidence increases when they share information that catalyses action from the police.

3. Co-creating a safety plan with the PLO motivates parents to implement safeguarding actions and to take control of the situation in their home.

4. Establishing a consistent and predictable response in the home shows the child that their parents are taking action because they care about them and want them to be safe, which has a calming effect in the house.

5. Encouraging parents to respond to their child with consistency and warmth reinforces that the home is a safe place and means the child is more likely to respond positively and disclose information in the future.

5. Virtuous and vicious circles

Identifying relationships between the three dimensions of understanding, empowerment and resilience has been a theme in previous research and publications. For example, Palmer and Jenkins (2014) reported that improving parents' knowledge of CSE and grooming helped them understand that neither they nor their child are at fault for what has happened, which can improve family relations. In their own description of the relational safeguarding model Pace assert that services blaming or disempowering parents increases the likelihood they become reluctant to engage, especially where they have had poor previous experiences of services. 'Parental disengagement will then potentially reinforce statutory agency prejudices and a situation can quickly spiral into hostility, a breakdown in communication and the loss of the shared focus of all parties to safeguard the child' (Pace, 2014:10). Our evaluation found that the PLO had a positive impact on other professionals' attitudes and practice, creating more supportive conditions for working with the family – an idea which is embedded in the relational safeguarding model (Pace, 2014; Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017).

By drawing on the concept of the virtuous/vicious circle, I am seeking to make sense of some of this data, as well as evidence and practice experience presented in other publications. The logic of a virtuous/vicious circle 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. This concept 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.

The systemic nature of risk is also highlighted by Beckett et al (2017) who argue that there are three inter-connected conditions that make CSE possible: perpetrator risk; the vulnerability of the child and inadequate protective structures. This perspective helps to clarify that abuse only 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 circle can help us recognise how professional beliefs about the role of parents in CSE cases can affect a child's life. When belief in parental capacity is reinforced amongst families and professionals, it creates a more effective context for safeguarding and vice versa. Using the key outcomes achieved by the PLO in our evaluation (understanding, empowerment and resilience), two models are presented below that show how parent empowerment and support can create a virtuous circle, and how the lack of it can create a vicious circle.

6. The dynamics of abuse and its impact on parents

The government's definition states that CSE occurs "where 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) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator" (DfE, 2017). Perpetrators' manipulation, control and abuse of children can affect parents in the following ways.

Confusion, disempowerment and emotional turmoil

Grooming is a key feature of most of the cases Pace is involved with (Pace, 2014). In these situations, the child may not see themselves as a victim or the perpetrator as an abuser (Beckett et al., 2017). This lack of awareness extends to parents who often recognise their child's welfare deteriorating, but don't know why. The deception and manipulation of the abuse can therefore be highly confusing for parents (Pace, 2014; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017).

Perpetrators use a variety of means to control a child they are grooming and/or sexually exploiting. They may emotionally blackmail them, insist on them using secret phones, threaten them or monitor their movements (Berelowitz et al., 2011; Pace, 2016). The result is that parents can find themselves disempowered in their own homes, trying to understand children who act secretively, don't adhere to parental expectations or have stopped talking with them. This lack of control can be debilitating (Kosaraju, 2008; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017).

When parents do find out that their child is being sexually exploited, it is an emotional burden that is very hard to bear. Beyond knowledge of the abuse itself, they may have to cope with hostility from their child, social isolation, and the strain placed on relationships in the home. Parents 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 and Jenkins, 2014; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017).

Figures 2 and 3 show how this confusion, disempowerment and emotional turmoil can be compounded or alleviated through the involvement and attitude of professionals.

7. The virtuous circle of parental empowerment

Our evaluation showed that the work of the Pace PLO helped parents a) understand CSE, b) be empowered to take safeguarding action and c) be more emotionally resilient to the abuse. Figure 2 illustrates the logic of a virtuous circle to show how one outcome can follow on from another, and together create an upward spiral through which the family environment is strengthened. To reiterate, this section presents a 'theory of change', rather than claiming that this cycle is what occurs in every case where parents are supported.

1. Understanding – 'I know what's happening'.
Pace PLOs equip parents with knowledge about CSE and are a conduit for other professionals to update parents about their child's case. The result is that parents better understand CSE, what has happened/ is happening to their child and how that affects their behaviour. If parents understand how children become groomed and/or exploited they are able to place responsibility for the abuse with the perpetrator. They can make sense of their child's behaviour, and come to see that neither they, nor their child are to blame.

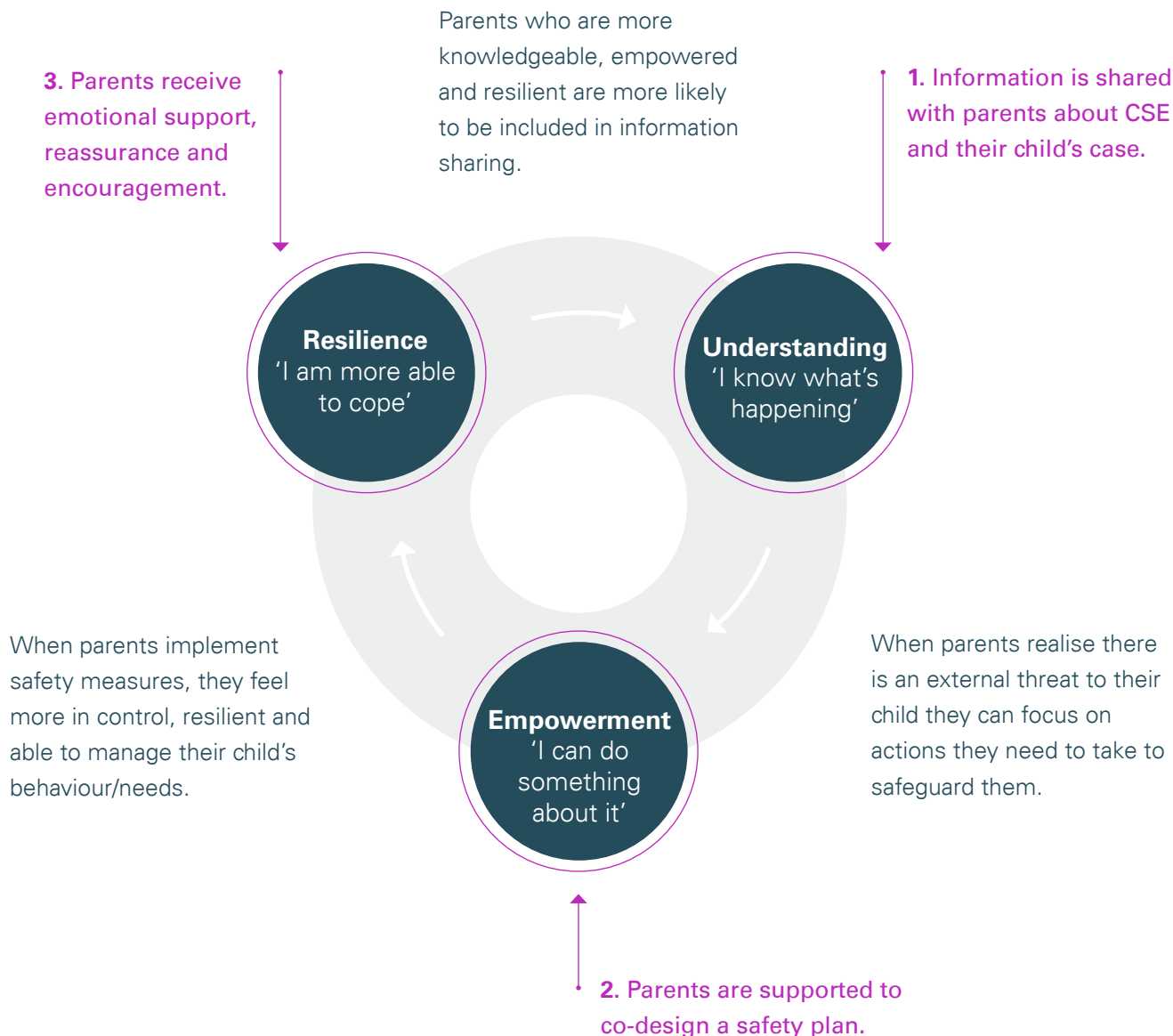### 2. Empowerment – 'I can do something about it'
When parents are equipped with knowledge about CSE, they can recognise that there is an external threat to their child, think about what action to take, and focus their energy on safeguarding. The PLO, in partnership with other agencies, helps parents to develop a safety plan, outlining the actions they can take to protect their child. If parents implement safety measures, they feel more in control and their confidence increases. Ongoing support from the PLO helps them manage their child's behaviour/needs, which improves relationships in the home. Other professionals then recognise the positive impact of involving parents.

3. Resilience – 'I am more able to cope'
As parents develop a greater sense of self-efficacy and control in safeguarding they become more emotionally resilient. The Pace PLO treats parents with empathy and provides emotional support, reassurance and encouragement when needed, which enables parents to better cope. If parents are more emotionally resilient to the impact of the abuse they are more able to focus their energy on protecting and caring for their child. Supported parents may also be more likely to engage with criminal trials, which present an additional emotional burden. This engagement can have a positive impact on prosecution rates.

Parents who are more knowledgeable, empowered and resilient are then more likely to be included in information sharing, creating an upward spiral.

Figure 2 – The virtuous circle of empowering parents

3. Parents receive emotional support, reassurance and encouragement.

Parents who are more knowledgeable, empowered and resilient are more likely to be included in information sharing.

1. Information is shared with parents about CSE and their child's case.

Resilience
'I am more able to cope'

Understanding
'I know what's happening'

When parents implement safety measures, they feel more in control, resilient and able to manage their child's behaviour/needs.

Empowerment
'I can do something about it'

When parents realise there is an external threat to their child they can focus on actions they need to take to safeguard them.

2. Parents are supported to co-design a safety plan.

Parent support   Impact

8. The vicious circle of parental disempowerment

Figure 3 reverses these steps and considers how a vicious circle can be created when parents are not included, empowered or supported in the care and protection of a child.

1. Confusion – 'I don't know what's happening'.

Professionals do not recognise parents as partners in safeguarding and do not share sufficient information about CSE, or their child's case with parents. If parents don't understand that their child has been coerced or groomed, they may assume the child has more control (and therefore responsibility) than they really do. Parents may also assume that they are themselves partly to blame for the situation. Without understanding the impact of CSE they are more likely to misinterpret the symptoms of abuse and trauma as problematic behaviour. Attempts to restrict or control the child's behaviour (even for their own safety) in response may push the child further away from the protective environment of the home.
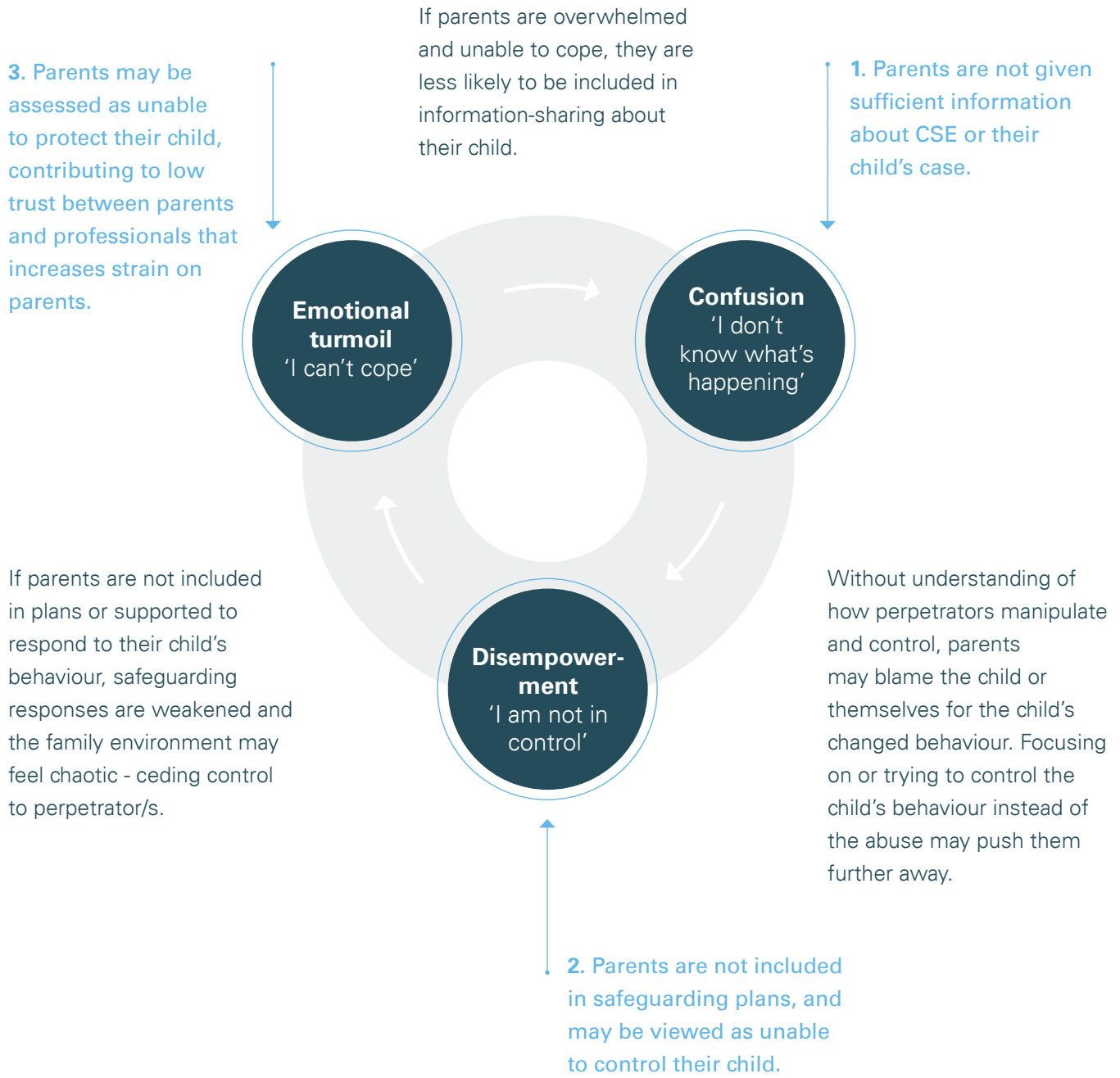
2. Disempowerment – 'I am not in control

If professionals then assess parents to be inadequately responding to the situation, those parents are likely to be further disempowered from safeguarding plans and arrangements. In turn, plans will suffer from the lack of parental engagement – further weakening a protective response. If parents feel disempowered or excluded by services, they are less likely to share information or cooperate with professionals. If parents are not supported in finding appropriate ways to manage their child's behaviour, life in the home may feel chaotic and unpredictable. This cedes power to the perpetrator/s, who may take advantage of weakened relationships to maintain their control of the child.

3. Emotional turmoil – 'I can't cope'

As risk remains high, the impact of their child being controlled and exploited can take a severe toll on parents' wellbeing. If trust between parents and professionals is low, or has broken down completely, parents could be viewed as unable to cope, and the home environment be assessed as unsupportive. If parents feel overwhelmed, unsupported and under scrutiny themselves, then life may become increasingly strained. Relationships in the home may suffer, the situation with the child may remain chaotic and unsafe, and parents may become unable to cope.

Parents who are overwhelmed and unable to cope are then less likely to be included in information-sharing – creating a downward spiral.

Figure 3 - The vicious circle of disempowering parents

If parents are overwhelmed and unable to cope, they are less likely to be included in information-sharing about their child.

3. Parents may be assessed as unable to protect their child, contributing to low trust between parents and professionals that increases strain on parents.

1. Parents are not given sufficient information about CSE or their child's case.

Emotional turmoil
'I can't cope'

Confusion
'I don't know what's happening'

Disempower-ment
'I am not in control'

If parents are not included in plans or supported to respond to their child's behaviour, safeguarding responses are weakened and the family environment may feel chaotic - ceding control to perpetrator/s.

Without understanding of how perpetrators manipulate and control, parents may blame the child or themselves for the child's changed behaviour. Focusing on or trying to control the child's behaviour instead of the abuse may push them further away.

2. Parents are not included in safeguarding plans, and may be viewed as unable to control their child.

⬤ Professional response ⬤ Impact

9. Discussion

Virtuous circles as a draft theory of change

I have proposed that the three outcomes identified in our evaluation form a virtuous circle, through which a strengthened family unit can become further strengthened. The key mechanism here is the perception and treatment of parents by professionals. Our evaluation demonstrated that the PLO can help parents understand CSE, implement safety plans and display emotional resilience. Arguably, professionals will find it easier to include knowledgeable, empowered and resilient parents in multi-agency safeguarding action. 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 is also 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. This demonstrates the practical value of taking a strength-based approach to parents from the start, rather than a posture that focuses on assessing the family's capacity to protect.

I have not explored in depth the impact of these outcomes on children themselves, but previous research highlights this in different ways. For example, the following outcomes have been attributed to support for families impacted by CSE (Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017; Scott, 2017; Scott and Botcherby, 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.

There is therefore scope for this work to be developed as part of a more comprehensive theory of change that tries to formalise the links between parent support and different elements and dimensions of children's safety in cases of CSE.

Future development

This paper is intentionally short, and is focused on conceptualising the value of supporting and working with parents in cases of CSE, drawing on our recent evaluation of the work of PLOs, and the other evaluations of and publications by Pace listed in the references section. There is stronger evidence for some aspects of the concept than others, and theorising necessarily involves making some assumptions. The value of these diagrams is in describing the ways that professional attitudes/actions affect parental beliefs/behaviours and the safeguarding potential of the home. However, such models can also be simplistic and linear - unable to describe the complexity of families' experiences of CSE. These are some limitations of the virtuous/vicious circle concept as I have presented it here, which could be explored or refined further.

- Resilience, empowerment and understanding occur simultaneously to some extent. In practice Pace PLOs don't wait to offer emotional support, but prioritise listening to parents in their first encounter.

- There are other elements of support that contribute to these outcomes. We know from previous evaluations of Pace that parents particularly value peer support from other affected parents, which they say strengthens them emotionally. Other professionals working with the child and family will also contribute to these positive outcomes.

- Parents will bring different resources and levels of resilience to the situations they face, and the impact of parental support will differ accordingly. The elements of the virtuous/vicious circle might therefore need to be amended for different groups of parents whose needs vary.

- It may be that this concept has particular resonance in cases of CSE where children have been groomed and are entrenched in serious and on-going exploitative relationships.

This paper should therefore be read alongside other evidence, and the concept of the virtuous and vicious circle should be tested by researchers in the future.

Messages for other professionals

Pace (2014) advise that a PLO will be most effective when workers are based in environments where the contribution of parents to safeguarding children is recognised and valued. Our own evaluation highlighted the role of the PLO in creating this environment through modelling a strength-based approach, and demonstrating the practical value of including and empowering parents on a case by case basis (Shuker and Ackerley, 2017). It should also be made clear, that any professional can support the creation of a virtuous circle, and these diagrams are not suggesting that parents will not be supported or included in the absence of a PLO. Other professionals can of course work towards the same outcomes as the PLO.

1. **Understanding:** all professionals can recognise the need to share information with parents, and empower them with knowledge that will help them make sense of the situation they are in.

2. **Empowerment:** all professionals can view parents as partners in safeguarding, include them in the design and implementation of safeguarding plans and support them to take appropriate action.

3. **Resilience:** all professionals can adopt an empathetic attitude toward parents, recognise their needs and offer encouragement.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper I cited Beckett et al (2017) who describe three inter-connected conditions that make CSE possible: a perpetrator; the vulnerability of the child and inadequate protective structures. This reminds us that parent support work in cases of CSE is happening in a complex environment, with many factors beyond the direct control of parents and PLOs. However, by strengthening parents' understanding, safeguarding capacity and resilience all three of these conditions can be positively affected.

- The control and power of the perpetrator can be weakened over time.
- The vulnerability of the child can be reduced by strengthening relationships in the home and implementing safety measures.
- Both the family and other services can become stronger protective structures in the child's life.

Professionals' attitudes and responses to parents can have an indirect but significant impact on a child's safety in CSE cases. Where parents are disempowered, excluded and unsupported this can have a detrimental impact on the child's welfare. In contrast, the relational safeguarding model developed by Pace is an example of how a strength-based approach can initiate the development of a virtuous circle where parents can truly become partners in safeguarding.

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