The Power of Positive Affirmation for Children in Care and Those with Care Experience

An exploration of stigma, unconscious bias, challenging lower expectations and how this translates to contextual safeguarding and young peoples outcomes. The power of expecting more, being more supportive and changing both the language and the narrative.

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What is an affirmation?

All words, whether spoken, written or thought are a form of affirmation

Affirmations are based on the idea that when something is **heard, spoken or written** enough people believe it's true.

It comes from the idea that how we **think** or **feel** about ourselves, and the views of others inform how we **subconsciously** treat ourselves

This is also true of what we think, feel or hear of others, and translates to how we subconsciously treat them.

What are we affirming nationally for children in care?

5x more likely to die in childhood
4x more likely to suffer poor health in later life
70% more likely to die prematurely

43,390 with Cause for Concern SDQ scores
58,570 with substance misuse
3x more likely to not be in education, training or employment

Language and our perceptions can be positively / negatively charged or neutral

Neutral

Hanna appears to be tired today as she yawned a few times and her eyes appeared heavy, although I have not asked her if she was tired.

Description of what happened, what you think and why. Clarity on what you did to confirm or exclude what you thought?

Positive

Hanna made an effort to come today even though she appeared tired.

Finding the positive to something observed, thinking wider than what was seen to draw out the positive connotation

Negative

Hanna was very rude today , she wasn't listening and kept yawning to show she was not bothered

Inferring what happened as opposed to describing. Attaching a negative emotion of how something made you feel.

Unconscious Bias and Stigma

Unconscious bias is a stereotype that you apply to people of a **specific group**, without consciously realising it.

Stigma refers to **negative attitudes, prejudices, or false beliefs** associated with specific traits or circumstances.

Official

SOCIAL GGRRAAACCEEESSS

The things influencing our social and personal identity

Gender
Geography
Race
Religion
Age
Ability
Appearance
Class
Culture
Ethnicity
Education
Employment
Sexual Orientation
Sexuality
Spirituality

Understanding our Social Graces enables us to be more aware of and challenge our biases

Other things that influence our language and ability to affirm positively…..

Time

Stress

Environment

Values

Relationships

Wellbeing

Mood

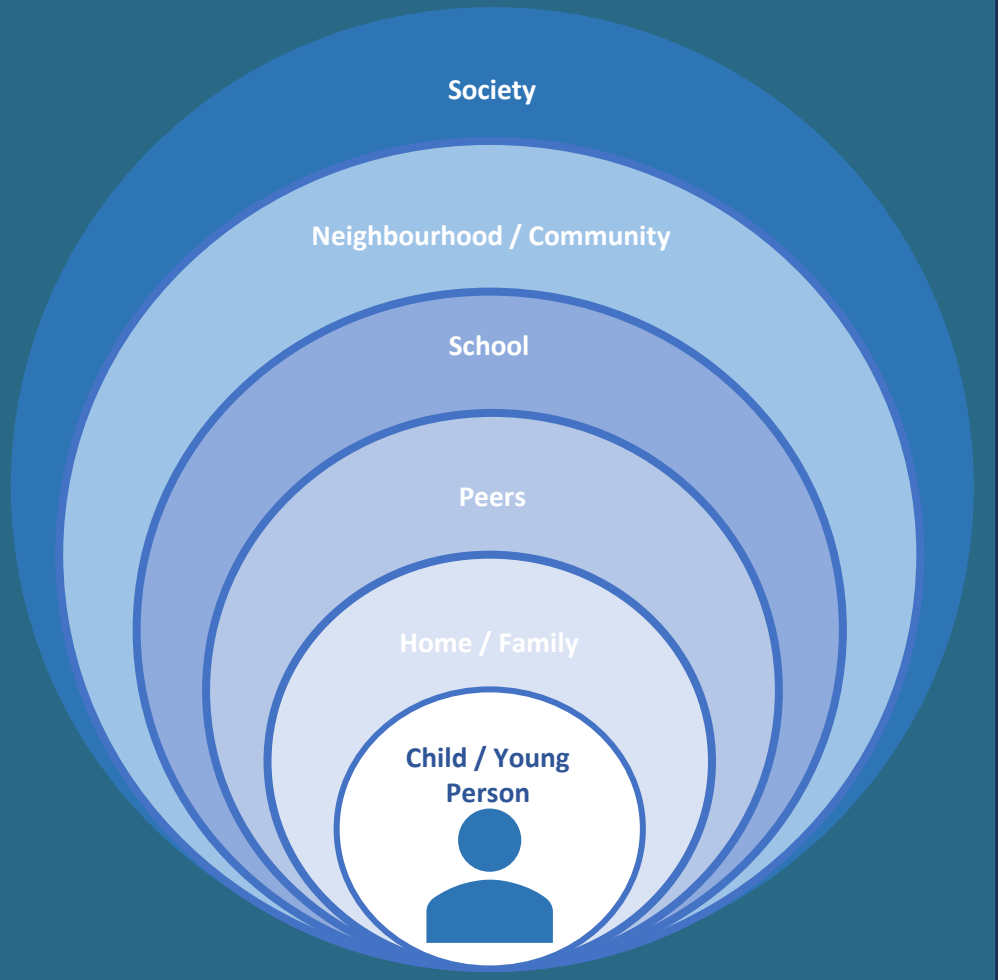
Interest

People

Information

Experiences

Upbringing



Contextual Safeguarding

Traditional **Safeguarding** approaches focus on risks to children in the family home or from care givers and trusted adults.

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding that recognises that children and young people can experience significant harm not only within their home environment, but also outside it.

The many environments around a child have the potential to act as either protective factors or risks.

Our biases and what we affirm for our children and young people can either make us struggle to identify risks or be overly aware of them.

Both of which carry with them unique risks…

Negative Affirmation or Unconscious Bias

Confirmation Bias and Over Focus

Confirmation bias is a subconscious process of interpreting, searching for or seeking information that confirms our belief

Focusing in on one risk that may or not be relevant to the child can affect our ability to adequately manage, risk assess and be aware of other risks to children

Adultification

Seeing children as older than they are – very common bias for children from black and brown communities

Also, very common for our children in care – what would be an appropriate curfew for our own children, what rules would they have in place

Feeling Disempowered

Can lead to both us and our young people feeling disempowered

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Children who feel professionals or care givers 'believe the worst' of them can become more likely to engage in risk taking behaviours as they feel they are already judged or in trouble for it

Isolation

It can also lead to an escalation of risks that may once have been minimal

Children that feel they are viewed negatively can alter their sense of trust in the adults around them and affect their confidence to disclose risks or harm

Belief you cannot affect change

Can lead to us becoming avert to addressing, escalating or challenging risks

Halo Bias

The halo effect is a psychosocial phenomenon that influences how we perceive and evaluate others. It occurs when we judge someone based on a specific positive attribute, allowing that judgment to positively influence our overall impression of the person, their views and opinions.

It can also affect our willingness to challenge the perceptions, language or narrative of other professionals around the child.

Confirmation Bias

Can lead to us dismissing risk red flags to uphold the positive view we have of the child

A belief that a child displaying attributes or behaviour we deem as 'positive' would not or could not be in risk taking scenarios can mean we are not screening or seeing risks

Is a manipulative girl who only wants to get her own way
Challenging
Does not get on with her peers
Risk of teenage pregnancy
Has been accommodated due to a physical altercation
Must be on drugs is very angry and rude
We suspect she sees boys and male acquaintances and then goes to her female friend's house to call us, so we speak to the mum and hear she is with them and okay
Wants to be in care so she does not have to follow the rules

“Ashleigh presents as a bright, self-aware student who is very keen to do well with her studies. I have to admit I was most impressed with the way she presented herself”

“Teachers inform us she has good potential to achieve A* in many subjects”

“She takes pride in her appearance”

“Extremely articulate and focused young woman”

“Friendly, respectful and mannerly”

And then the language changed….

“Engages positively and productively…”

“Extremely independent and resilient…”

“Is a good role model for other young people…”

“Can achieve anything she puts her mind too…”

What is the impact of lower expectations for children in care?

- It decreases aspirations
- It reduces confidence
- It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy
- It affects the services and support we offer children
- It creates and increases barriers

How do we challenge ourselves to have higher aspirations?

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