

Dimensions of a Child's Lived Experience

A child's lived experience is the *totality of how they experience daily life*.

In social work, the truth of a child's life is not found in isolated facts, single incidents, professionals opinions, or adult accounts alone.

It is found in their **lived experience**, the day-to-day reality of how they eat, sleep, learn, play, relate, and feel safe or unsafe. It is in the texture of daily life that the deepest truths of safety, harm, resilience, and unmet need are located.

A child's lived experience is not always easily visible. It can be obscured by adult narratives, distorted by professional assumptions, or hidden beneath silence, shame, or fear.

Yet the law, research, and ethical practice remind us that interventions must be child-focused and anchored in the child's own perspective of their world.

Because in safeguarding, to miss the child's lived experience is to miss the child themselves.

Dimensions

1. Physical Wellbeing and Basic Need

- Nutrition and food security: Is the child fed regularly, healthily, and appropriately for their age? Malnutrition, obesity, or food insecurity indicate unmet needs.
- Health care access: Engagement with GP, immunisations, dental, and eye care. Missed appointments may point to neglect, poverty, or disguised compliance.
- Sleep and rest: Regular, restorative sleep is essential for learning, mood regulation, and physical health. Night terrors, bed-sharing due to fear, or disturbed sleep may signal trauma.
- Clothing and hygiene: Is clothing, age-appropriate, weather-appropriate, clean, and sufficient? Poor hygiene may reflect neglect, parental incapacity, or severe deprivation.

2. Safety and Protection

- Exposure to harm: Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect; exploitation; domestic abuse.
- Supervision: Is monitoring age-appropriate? Inadequate supervision increases risks of

accidents, exploitation, and harmful behaviours.

- Environmental safety: Housing conditions (damp, overcrowding, hazards) directly affect health and wellbeing.
- Community safety: Peer and neighbourhood risk, including gangs, county lines, and exposure to violence.

3. Emotional and Psychological World

- Attachment security: The quality of caregiving relationships and the child's trust in consistent care.
- Emotional regulation: Ability to express, manage, and recover from emotions. Dysregulation often reflects trauma or unmet need.
- Self-concept and identity: How the child views themselves: resilient, worthless, ashamed, hopeful.
- Mental health: Anxiety, depression, trauma, eating disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation.

4. Relational and Family Life

- Parent–child relationship: Warmth, responsiveness, boundaries, and emotional availability.
- Sibling relationships: Protective bonds, rivalry, or abuse within sibling dynamics.
- Extended family and kinship: Stability and continuity in wider networks of the family.
- Parental capacity to change: Insight, motivation, and resilience in improving care.

5. Educational Development

- School attendance: Regular, punctual attendance or persistent absence/exclusion.
- Achievement and learning needs: Attainment relative to potential, SEN, and cognitive development.
- Relationships in education: Peer friendships, teacher support, experiences of bullying or inclusion.

- Aspirations: Whether the child has hopes and achievable goals for the future.

6. Social and Peer World

- Friendships: Supportive peers or harmful peer groups.
- Social participation: Involvement in sport, youth clubs, faith groups, cultural activities.
- Sense of belonging: Inclusion or marginalisation within peer and community groups.

Remember, Peer networks strongly shape vulnerability to exploitation and protective resilience.

7. Identity and Culture

- Ethnicity, religion, and cultural heritage: Recognition, affirmation, and respect in daily life.
- Language and communication: Access to interpretation, recognition of bilingual identity, communication support.
- Gender and sexuality: Affirmation and safe expression of gender identity and sexual orientation.
- Neurodiversity and disability: Inclusion, accessibility, and societal attitudes to difference.

8. Economic and Material Context

- Poverty and deprivation: Access to food, heating, clothing, resources.
- Housing security: Stability, adequacy, and safety of accommodation.
- Parental employment: Stability of income, impact of working hours on care.

Remember, Poverty itself is not neglect, but interacts with risk and must be considered within structural inequalities.

9. Participation and Voice

- Right to be heard: Does the child's perspective inform decisions about their life or care?
- Agency in daily life: Age-appropriate choice over food, clothing, friendships, routines.

- Legal participation: Representation through CAFCASS or advocates.

10. Time, Continuity, and Stability

- Daily rhythms: Predictable routines that foster safety and regulation.
- Stability: Continuity of caregiving and levels of disruption.
- Life story work: Maintaining continuity of memory and identity throughout childhood.

Remember, Stability is a critical predictor of long-term wellbeing; instability compounds harm.

11. Systemic and Structural Dimensions

- Discrimination and inequality: Racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, class bias.
- Barriers to services: Poverty, immigration status, cultural mismatch with services.
- Professional systems: How statutory and voluntary agencies engage with families.

Remember, Structural oppression compounds individual risk; assessments must examine systemic as well as personal harm.

12. Future Orientation

- Aspirations and hope: The child's vision for the future.
- Preparation for adulthood: Skills for independence, education, and employment.
- Life transitions: Support for adolescence, care-leaving, disability transition, transition to adulthood services

13. Digital and Online World

- Access and safety: Device use, access to internet, risk of digital exclusion.
- Online risks: Grooming, bullying, radicalisation, pornography, exploitation.
- Positive digital life: Online friendships, learning, and creativity.

14. Privacy and Personal Space

- Physical privacy: A safe bed, storage for belongings, private space for rest and self-care.
- Respect for boundaries: Autonomy over body and possessions.

15. Play, Creativity, and Leisure

- Access to play: Opportunities for exploration, fun, and relaxation.
- Creativity: Hobbies, arts, sport, music, imagination.
- Deprivation: Lack of play linked to stress and delayed development.

16. Autonomy and Choice

- Everyday decision-making: Clothing, food, activities.
- Independence: Safe levels of autonomy as children grow up.
- Opportunities to develop resilience: Age-appropriate responsibility.

17. Spiritual and Moral World

- Faith and spirituality: Participation in religious or spiritual practices of choice.
- Moral values: Development of ethical frameworks through family, peers, and community.
- Risks: Forced religious practice, exclusion, or coercion.

18. Mobility and Freedom of Movement

- Travel and independence: Safe exploration of neighbourhood and peer visits.
- Restrictions: Over-restriction due to coercion, parental fear, or unsafe environments.

19. Sensory and Environmental Experience

- Sensory environment: Noise, light, clutter, chaos, or calm.

- Neurodiversity: How sensory overstimulation or deprivation impacts wellbeing.

20. Use of Time and Daily Rhythms

- Time allocation: School, play, chores, waiting, isolation.
- Hidden neglect: Long hours alone, inappropriate responsibilities, disrupted rhythms.

Remember, Daily patterns are strong markers of unmet needs and harm.

21. Exposure to Adult Worlds

- Adultification: Excessive responsibility for siblings, translation, or finances.
- Loss of childhood: Premature assumption of adult roles undermines development.

22. Experiences of Justice and Fairness

- Fair treatment at home: Consistency of rules and discipline.
- Fairness in education: Responses to behaviour, inclusion, and exclusion.
- Fairness in systems: Experiences of bias, racism, or unequal sanctions.

Early experiences of justice shape trust in authority and identity.

23. Emotional Climate of the Home

- Atmosphere: Warmth, humour, predictability, or fear, volatility, and silence.
- Emotional safety: Does the child feel safe enough to express their needs?

24. Micro-Instability and Transitions

- Frequent small changes: Repeated moves between rooms, houses, carers, or schools.
- Impact: Cumulative instability undermines security and identity.

25. Social Narratives and Labels

- How children are spoken about and described: "Resilient," "difficult," "naughty," "victim."

- Impact of labels: Shapes self-concept, opportunities, and how systems respond.

26. Connection to Nature and Environment

- Access to outdoor spaces: Green areas, parks, and nature.
- Psychological impact: Strong evidence links nature to resilience and recovery.

27. Continuity and Narrative of Self

- Life story work: Building coherent identity through memory and narrative.
- Continuity across moves: Maintaining objects, routines, and identity anchors.

28. Micro-Interactions with Professionals

- Daily experiences: Being listened to, respected, and believed.
- Impact: Shapes trust in systems and willingness to disclose harm.

29. Imagination of the Future

- How children think about what lies ahead: hopeful, fearful, uncertain.
- Future orientation: Protective against despair, withdrawal, or self-harm.

30. Silence

- What is not spoken: Fear, coercion, loyalty, or shame may silence children.
- Non-verbal communication: Behaviour, play, body language as expressions of truth.
- Professional role: To notice silence as much as speech, and to interpret it safely.

31. Experience of authority

- How children experience authority (parental, professional, peer).
- Whether they can assert themselves or are silenced.

Relevance: Power dynamics shape disclosure, compliance, and resilience.

32. Experience of Transitions Across Systems

- Movement between services (health to CAMHS, school to exclusion, from one social work team to another).

33. Exposure to Hope and Joy

- Beyond safety and risk: does the child experience joy, laughter, hope?
- Lack of positive emotional experience can indicate neglect as much as overt harm.

34. Visibility and Recognition

- Is the child truly "seen" by adults, or do siblings, culture, or parental needs eclipse them
- Invisible children are a known risk factor in cases of serious harm.

35. Everyday routine

- Small but crucial consistencies: knowing who will collect them from school, having food in the fridge, predictable bedtime.
- Insecurity in these micro-experiences compounds anxiety even when "big" risks are unseen.

In social work, a child's lived experience is not a single dimension but a combination of daily realities such as safety, love, identity, voice, security, hope.

Each dimension on its own offers only a fragment; together they form the truth of what it means to grow up in a family, a community, and a system.

The task of the social worker is to hold these dimensions in tension, to triangulate them against one another, and to listen as much to what is absent as to what is spoken.

A child's life cannot be reduced to risk factors or protective factors alone; it must be understood in its complexity, contradictions, and possibilities for change.

The more consistently we map these dimensions, the more defensible, ethical, and humane our interventions become.

And most importantly, we move closer to the heart of safeguarding: ensuring that every child is not only safe, but also seen, heard, and enabled to achieve the best they can.

Every child's life is written in moments, not in paperwork. Social work at its best protects those moments, so children can grow not just in safety, but in dignity and possibility, in hope and love.