

# Peer Influence Assessment - Practice tool

In recent years, contextual safeguarding has fundamentally shifted how we understand harm in children's lives. It has helped us see that children are not only harmed within families, but also within the places, spaces, and contexts they move through like the schools, neighbourhoods, parks, transport routes, and online environments.

This has been a necessary and important correction. It has challenged individualised, family-only narratives and made visible the ways in which harm is often embedded in environments over which children have little control.

However, in practice, this focus on *context* still leaves something essential unexplored which is the child's relational world within those contexts. Too often, the child is positioned as someone *exposed to risk in places*, rather than as a young person actively navigating relationships, loyalties, identities, and unmet needs within peer groups that may offer both protection and harm at the same time.

In this resource, I have developed a peer friendship and peer influence assessment that sits alongside contextual safeguarding but goes further.

In this resource, I argue that we should not only ask *where* harm occurs, but also asks *why certain peer relationships hold such power for a child*, and *what those relationships are doing for the child*, including the impact and consequences for the child.

The perspective here is that children are not always passive recipients of peer influence. They form bonds, attachments, and allegiances that make sense in the context of their lives. Peer groups can provide belonging where there is isolation, identity where there is marginalisation, protection where there is fear, and material or emotional support where systems have failed to meet need.

For some children, loyalty to peers it is survival or belonging. For others, it is tied to inherited identity scripts, racialised expectations, gendered norms, or the pressure to appear strong, respected, or 'not weak' in environments that punish vulnerability.

Poverty, exclusion, and unmet needs do not sit in the background of peer relationships because they actively shape them. Peer groups may function as informal welfare systems, sources of status and aspiration, or pathways to futures that feel more attainable than those offered by schools or services.

In these circumstances, asking a child to disengage from peers without understanding what they would lose it is destabilising and not protective.

This resource argues that we should not be seeing the child as merely *located within risky contexts* and instead place the child at the centre of a complex relational system, shaped by intersectionality, scarcity, trauma, identity, and aspiration.

The key lesson here is that peer influence is not simply about exposure or choice, but also about positioning within systems of meaning and power that offer something compelling, even when they are harmful.

For example, peer relationships are influenced by, and can actively provide:

- **Intersectionality and identity**, including how race, gender, disability, sexuality, immigration status, and cultural narratives shape who is protected, who is targeted, and how behaviour is interpreted
- **Poverty and structural exclusion**, where peer groups may function as informal welfare systems providing money, transport, safety, or access that families or services cannot
- **Unmet emotional and physical needs**, including attachment hunger, loneliness, and the need to feel seen, valued, or understood
- **Belonging and loyalty**, where peer bonds offer stability, protection, or meaning that feels non-negotiable to the child
- **Identity formation and inherited scripts**, such as expectations around toughness, masculinity, respect, or survival shaped by family history, neighbourhood norms, or racialised experiences
- **Status and aspiration**, where peer systems promise faster, more visible routes to recognition, success, or escape than institutional pathways
- **Trauma adaptations**, including appeasement, hypervigilance, or allegiance as survival responses rather than poor decision-making
- **Digital-physical convergence**, where online relationships, humiliation, control, or grooming translate directly into offline harm and limit the possibility of safe exit

- **Peer-provided capital**, including material, social, emotional, and informational resources that would be lost if the child disengaged
- **System interactions**, where school exclusion, placement instability, criminalisation, or fragmented services unintentionally strengthen harmful peer bonds
- **Developmental timing**, recognising that peer influence changes shape as children grow, and that delay can harden patterns that were once fluid
- **Future pull**, where peer relationships are sustained not only by pressure but by the futures they appear to offer
- **Exit feasibility**, including the real costs, risks, and losses a child would face if asked to leave a peer group without adequate replacement support

By developing a structured way to assess peer friendships and peer influence, this resource seeks to support practitioners to understand not only *where* risk is located, but *why it holds*, *what it provides*, and *what it would take to reduce harm without creating further loss for the child*.

Because often we tend to reduce everything to peer influence, however children are not just simply 'influenced' by peers. In reality, they are positioned within overlapping systems of meaning, power, identity, scarcity, and aspiration. Therefore, in addition to the context the child is situated, we also need to consider:

- *Why this peer system exists*
- *What need it meets for the child*
- *What identity it offers*
- *What future it promises*
- *What it costs the child to stay or leave*

## How does social work see Peer Influence

### 1. The historical dominance of the family as the primary unit of analysis

Children's social work has been built on a family-centric epistemology. From attachment theory through to risk assessment frameworks, the family has been positioned as the principal site or location of both harm and protection.

This has produced important insights, but it has also generated bias where developmental meaning is overwhelmingly located within familial context and

parental relationships, while peer relationships are treated as peripheral or transitional.

#### As a result:

- Parenting capacity is scrutinised in depth
- Family history is interrogated extensively
- Intergenerational patterns are mapped carefully

#### Meanwhile, peer relationships are often reduced to:

- Friendship issues
- Negative peers
- Associating with older children
- Risky friendship groups/ gang association

The issue with these framings rarely ask what the peer system is doing for the child, or why it has become psychologically or materially significant.

## 2. Developmental theory has been selectively applied

Developmental theories establish that peer relationships are crucial and they tend to become increasingly central from middle childhood onward, particularly during adolescence, when identity formation, social learning, and moral reasoning shift away from parents and towards peers. However, in social work practice this insight tends to be selectively applied. This is shown through what we do well and not so well in practice

#### We do quite well in:

- Using development to explain attachment patterns
- Using early experiences to understand emotional regulation
- Using family context to interpret behaviour

#### What we often miss:

- That peers are primary sites of **identity rehearsal**
- That peers function as **mirrors, audiences, and regulators** of behaviour
- That peer groups actively shape norms, values, and acceptable risk

The result is in the paradox where we acknowledge adolescence as a peer-oriented developmental stage, however rarely assess peer systems with the same seriousness as we assess families.

### **3. Identity work has been narrowed to family and ethnicity**

In practice, increasingly there is finally an expansion of attention to race, ethnicity, culture, and identity in children's social work. However, identity is still largely conceptualised as something transmitted from adults to children.

#### **Identity is explored and understood through:**

- Family heritage
- Cultural and ethnic background
- Parenting narratives
- Intergenerational trauma

#### **What is often underexplored is how identity is:**

- Performed and tested among peers
- Rewarded or punished within friendship groups/online spaces/competitive spaces
- Shaped by peer norms around masculinity, femininity, toughness, loyalty, and respect

For many children, especially those experiencing marginalisation or exclusion, peer groups are the primary arena where identity becomes real.

This includes racialised identity ('how to survive being seen as threatening'), gendered identity, and class-based survival narratives.

### **4. Peer influence is often misframed as 'choice'**

Another way that peer influence is minimised is that it is frequently framed as voluntary association. Unlike family relationships, which are seen as imposed, peer relationships are often assumed to be chosen.

#### **This framing ignores and obscures several realities:**

- Peer systems often involve coercion, threat, and debt
- Exit can carry significant social, emotional, or physical cost
- Belonging may be conditional on compliance

- Leaving may result in isolation, retaliation, or loss of protection

## 5. Risk frameworks are mainly focused on relational systems within the family

*Most assessment tools are designed to evaluate:*

- Individuals (parents, carers)
- Parenting capacity
- Household or family dynamics

*They are not designed to analyse:*

- Networks
- Group dynamics
- Social contagion
- Power and influence within peer system

As a result, peer influence is often recorded descriptively (known to associate with...) without analytical depth. This leads to:

- Over-reliance on labels (e.g. 'gang-involved')
- Under-analysis of peer relational mechanisms
- Interventions that target the child rather than the system

Often, peer influence becomes visible only when it escalates into criminality or exploitation, rather than being understood as a developmental and relational process earlier on.

*When peer influence is treated as secondary, in practice:*

- Children are misunderstood as reckless rather than adaptive
- Harm is individualised rather than contextualised
- Interventions focus on behaviour change rather than relational repositioning
- Exit is demanded without understanding what the child would lose

Most critically, children's loyalties, fears, and aspirations are misread, and safeguarding responses fail to align with the child's lived reality.

## The Three Layers of Peer Influence

Peer influence is not exposure, association, or behaviour. It is a co-produced social force shaped by identity, scarcity, systems, technology, and time.

*Children do not 'fall into' peer influence. They are positioned within it.*

Peer influence, therefore, should be understood through its layers. In this resource, I argue that there are at least three layers to peer influence:

## Layer 1: The Peer Field

*(This is the structural reality the child is positioned within)*

When I say 'peer field', I am deliberately not saying 'friends'. I mean the social structure that surrounds a child and shapes who they can access, who can access them, and what kinds of relationships become likely.

A child's peer influence is not driven only by individual preference, it is patterned by **exposure, opportunity, proximity, power, accessibility, and constraint**.

In other words, the 'peer field' is the *environment of relationships* the child is living inside. In practice, this layer invites us to stop making the classic error of collapsing peer risk into a list of names.

A list of peers tells us little unless we understand the architecture of the peer world: who holds power, who controls access, how influence travels, and how easy it is for the child to step out of the field without loss or retaliation.

### What does this Layer mean:

Layer 1 answers three foundational questions:

- **Position:** Where is the child situated in the peer world (central, peripheral, dependent, isolated)?
- **Power:** Who holds influence, resources, protection, or coercive control within the field?
- **Pathways:** Through which routes does the field reproduce itself (school, transport, online, neighbourhood, services)?

This matters because two children can both be 'with the same peers' yet occupy entirely different positions and risks, thus their experience within the peer group can be different.

## A. Structure

Structure refers to how the peer field is organised, its shape, and distribution of influence.

### 1) Density

This looks at how interconnected the group is.

- **High density:** everyone knows everyone; norms spread quickly; pressure to conform is high; secrets and reputations travel fast.
- **Low density:** fragmented groups; influence is weaker but can be concentrated in key bridges.

#### *Why it matters:*

Dense fields accelerate 'normalisation' where harmful behaviours can become 'ordinary' faster because deviation is visible and punished.

### 2) Central figures

Every peer field has people who function as:

- **'connectors'** (introduce people, create access)
- **'status anchors - leaders'** (define what is respected)
- **'resource holders'** (money, transport, substances, online accounts)
- **'enforcers'** (punish disloyalty, enforce silence)

#### *Why it matters:*

if the child is connected to a central figure, risk tends to be **systemic**, not incidental. Harm can be organised, coordinated, and escalated quickly.

### 3) Isolation and dependency

Some children are socially isolated outside the peer field. They may appear 'choosing' risky peers, but in reality they may have no viable alternative belonging.

#### **Indicators of dependency:**



- the peer group is the child's only reliable source of connection
- most contact happens outside supervised settings
- the child's self-worth is tightly tied to peer validation
- disengagement would create immediate loneliness, fear, or practical loss

### **Why it matters:**

Isolation increases susceptibility to coercion and loyalty-based control.

### **4) Bridges between groups**

Bridges link different environments:

- school connects to neighbourhood
- neighbourhood connects with online spaces
- younger peers connect with older peers
- mainstream peer groups connect to exploitation networks

### **Why it matters:**

Bridges are often where escalation happens (recruitment, grooming, access to older actors of influence, movement into crime/exploitation).

## **B. Peer Connection Strength**

The connection strength is about how binding the connections are.

Things that determine connection strength:

- **frequency** of contact (daily, nightly, sporadic)
- **intensity** (emotional load, dependency, volatility)
- **secrecy** (hidden communications, deleted messages, multiple accounts)
- **obligations** (favours owed, money owed, sexual coercion, 'loyalty tests')
- **exclusivity** ('you don't need anyone else')

### **Why it matters:**

In reality, strong ties increase the 'exit cost'. A child can't simply 'avoid' a peer field if the relationships are emotionally binding, materially sustaining, or enforced through fear and shame.

## C. Pathways

Pathways are the routes through which the peer field is accessed and maintained.

***These are not limited to, but common pathways include:***

- **school** (friendship groups, exclusions, off-site truancy, after-school clustering)
- **neighbourhood** (estates, parks, shops, local hangouts)
- **transport** (bus routes, trains, lifts offered by older peers)
- **online** (group chats, gaming parties, Snapchat/Instagram, Telegram/WhatsApp)
- **service geography** (youth centres, placements, PRUs, alternative provision)

***Why it matters:***

Pathways indicate where influence is reproduced and therefore where intervention can realistically reduce exposure. If the pathway is 24/7 digital access, traditional 'keep them indoors' strategies fail. If the pathway is school exclusion, the system has created exposure time.

## D. Gatekeeping and Control

Gatekeeping is about who controls access, information, and movement within the peer field.

**Gatekeepers are the ones that often:**

- decide who is 'in' and who is 'out'
- control introductions to older peers
- set the terms of loyalty
- establish and enforce secrecy
- punish withdrawal or disclosure

*A critical diagnostic question here is:*

***'Who would notice first if this child tried to disengage, and what would they do?'***

This question helps to detect coercive dynamics without requiring the child to label them as coercion. The answer often reveals whether the peer field is merely influential or structurally controlling.

## E. Visibility, Surveillance, and Reputation

Modern peer fields include also surveillance, which happens both offline and digitally.

### ***Things to look for:***

- whether the child is 'tracked' (location sharing, constant messaging, pressure to respond)
- whether reputational harm is used as control (humiliation, exposure, threats to 'ruin' them)
- whether there are 'digital artefacts' that bind the child (images, videos, passwords)

### **Why it matters:**

When surveillance and control exists, the child cannot simply 'step back' quietly. Withdrawal becomes visible and triggers consequences for the child.

## F. Exit Friction

This is the final output of Layer 1 which is basically assessing how hard is it for the child to leave the peer field?

### ***Exit friction increases when:***

- the field is dense and tightly connected
- central figures are controlling
- the child is dependent or isolated
- digital surveillance and control is constant
- the child holds debts (social, moral, material, sexual, reputational)
- the peer field provides protection from other threats

You can think of exit friction as the structural answer to:

***'Is this a friendship situation, or being part of system of constraint and control?'***

*By the end of this layer, you should be able to state, clearly and defensibly:*

- the **shape** of the peer field (dense/fragmented; centralised/dispersed)
- the child's **position** within it (central/peripheral/dependent/isolated)
- the main **routes** sustaining it (school/neighbourhood/digital/transport)
- the presence or absence of **gatekeeping/surveillance**
- the level of **exit friction** (easy, pressured, dangerous, impossible without support)

Assessment should be structural and not just a mere description or blame to 'bad peers', but by analyzing the social system the child is situated within.

## Layer 2: The Meaning System

*(This layer is about what the peer world offers, demands, and rewards)*

In Layer 1, we established the structure of the peer field. In Layer 2 we establish why it holds.

When I refer to a 'meaning system', I am drawing on developmental psychology, sociology, and behavioural science, all of which consistently demonstrate that people do not remain in relationships simply because of proximity or habit.

They remain because relationships perform essential psychological and social functions such as shaping identity, regulating emotion, providing belonging, and organising how individuals understand safety, value, and possibility in their lives.

For children and adolescents, peer relationships are not a 'nice-to-have'. They are a primary arena for identity formation, belonging, status, safety, and self-worth. That is why peer influence can be powerful even when adults view the relationships as harmful, irrational, or 'obviously bad'.

In practice, Layer 2 can help understand that it is wrong assuming that 'insight' should automatically lead to disengagement.

A child can fully understand that something is risky and still remain attached because the peer system is meeting needs that feel essential, urgent, or non-negotiable. A child can also appear 'defiant' when in fact they are being loyal, frightened, indebted, or protecting an identity that keeps them safe.

In practice, we often end up interpreting peer involvement as mere 'choice'. However, the key question is understanding what is this peer system doing for the child, and what does it demand in return?

*To understand this we need to look at four foundational questions:*

- **Function:** What needs are being met through this peer system?
- **Norms:** What does the system define as normal, acceptable, admirable, or weak?
- **Currencies:** What is traded in this peer economy (status, fear, secrecy, money, access, protection)?
- **Identity:** What kind of person does the child have to be to belong here?

### **Key Test:**

In practice, we need to change our analysis away from moralised labels such as 'bad peers' and towards a causal understanding of how the peer system operates, what it rewards, what it sanctions, and how the child's behaviour, loyalties, and adaptations emerge as rational responses to those conditions.

### **A. Belonging as a Psychological Need**

Belonging is not a soft concept. For children, belonging is often experienced as **safety**, and for adolescents it is also linked to identity stability. Peer groups can provide a sense of 'being held' in a way that adults may underestimate, especially where the child has experienced instability, rejection, shame, or invisibility.

Peer belonging may be serving as:

- a substitute for inconsistent caregiving or relational insecurity
- a protection against loneliness, bullying, racism, or exclusion
- an antidote to humiliation or failure (including school-based failure)
- an immediate source of recognition when other systems feel rejecting

### **Key question to ask**

*What does belonging provide for this child, and what does it shield them from?*

This question matters because when belonging functions as a form of protection (whether emotional, social, or physical) disrupting it without offering an alternative does not reduce risk. It often displaces that risk elsewhere or intensifies it by removing the child's existing perceived source of safety or need fulfilment.

### **B. Identity Scripts and Role Expectations**

Peer systems rarely tolerate neutrality. They produce identities of 'who we are' and 'who we are not'.

These identities are sustained through repeated messaging, rituals, and sanctions. This is where peer influence becomes structurally powerful, because the child is not simply conforming to behaviour but they are conforming to a social identity.

***Identity scripts can include:***

- 'toughness' (never back down, never show fear)
- 'loyalty' (don't disclose, don't betray, don't leave)
- 'respect' (maintain reputation through readiness to retaliate)
- 'gender scripts' (misogyny shaping expectations of girls; hypermasculinity shaping expectations of boys)
- 'racialised survival scripts' (e.g. 'I need to be hard because I'm Black and the world reads me that way')
- 'family legacy scripts' (e.g. 'my dad was feared/respected; that's what men do')

***These scripts are often reinforced by:***

- storytelling ('what happened to someone who snitched')
- humiliation rituals
- 'tests' of loyalty
- rewards for performance (attention, inclusion, protection)

***Key question***

*How does the child have to act, behave, or present themselves in order to belong within this peer system?*

This question draws from developmental and social identity theory, which shows that adolescence is a period in which identity is not only explored but actively shaped through repeated performance and feedback.

Peer systems reward certain behaviours, attitudes, and self-presentations while discouraging or punishing others. Over time, these repeated adaptations move from situational behaviour to internalised identity, narrowing the range of who the child feels able to be and shaping their future choices, relationships, and sense of self.

**C. Norm Transmission and Moral Recalibration**

Peer systems do not only change behaviour, they change what feels normal. Over time, children may recalibrate their moral and risk thresholds to match the group. However, this is not simply 'bad attitude' but social learning under conditions where belonging is contingent.

***Norms can shift around:***

- violence (what counts as justified)
- exploitation (what counts as acceptable)
- consent (what counts as negotiable)
- secrecy (what counts as loyalty)
- harm (what counts as 'not a big deal')

A major safeguarding risk is when harm becomes ordinary within the peer system.

***Key question***

*What experiences, behaviours, or exposures have become normalised for this child that would not have been considered normal a year ago?*

This question focus on observable change over time, allowing to identify normalisation of harm without relying on moral judgement or retrospective bias.

**D. Status, Shame, and Reputation**

Peer influence often operates through an internal economy where social rewards and punishments regulate behaviour more effectively than adult sanctions. Adolescents, in particular, are developmentally sensitive to peer evaluation. Status and shame are not superficial but powerful behavioural regulators.

***Common 'currencies' include:***

- reputation ('respect')
- fear (being known as dangerous)
- desirability (sexual capital, attractiveness, control)
- scarcity access (money, trainers, phones, rides)
- social visibility (being noticed, being 'someone')

***Punishments include:***

- humiliation
- exclusion
- threats of exposure
- violence
- reputational destruction

### ***Key question***

*What behaviours, attitudes, or forms of self-presentation are rewarded within this peer system, and which are sanctioned or punished for this child?*

This question draws on behavioural economics and social learning theory, recognising that behaviour is shaped less by intention than by incentive structures because children adapt in predictable ways to what brings safety, status, inclusion, or protection, and to what carries social or material cost.

### **E. Protection Trades and Conditional Safety**

Some peer systems operate like informal security arrangements where the child receives protection, but only if they comply. This is especially relevant where children feel unsafe due to bullying, neighbourhood violence, racism, or previous victimisation.

#### ***Protection trades can look like:***

- ‘we keep you safe if you stay loyal or if you deliver these drugs for us’
- ‘you’re safe because you’re with us’
- ‘you can’t leave because then you’re exposed’

This creates structural binding where leaving is not just social loss, it feels like physical danger.

### ***Key question***

*What does this peer system offer the child in terms of protection, status, or safety, and what behaviours, compliance, or sacrifices are required in return?*

This question can help make visible how protection within peer systems can be conditional and manipulative, where safety is promised or implied but contingent on obedience, silence, or participation.



It clarifies why leaving can feel unsafe or impossible even when the child recognises harm, because the perceived cost of withdrawal may include exposure to threat, isolation, or retaliation.

## **F. Coercion, Control, and Debt-Based Loyalty**

This is where influence becomes enforced. Many children cannot name coercion as coercion but they will describe it as loyalty, obligation, or 'it's complicated'.

The assessment must therefore interpret coercion through structure and function, not just disclosure.

### ***Debt can be:***

- **material** (money, stolen goods, drugs, transport)
- **social** (favours, introductions, 'you owe us')
- **sexual** (coerced acts framed as obligation)
- **reputational** (threats to expose, shame, images, videos)
- **digital** (passwords, accounts, shared access)

### **Key question**

*What would happen to this child if they said no, or tried to leave?*

This is a coercive control diagnostic. The answer often can help reveal threat architecture.

## **G. Aspirational Gravity: The Future the Peer System Promises**

Peer systems do not only operate through pressure. They operate through promise. They offer futures that feel more attainable than those offered by school, services, or employment pathways, especially where exclusion, poverty, or discrimination have narrowed legitimate routes.

### ***Peer systems may promise:***

- income
- status
- protection
- identity
- belonging
- escape from invisibility

This promise creates gravity and the child is pulled towards the peer system, not just pushed.

### **Key question**

*What future does this peer system promise the child that they experience as unavailable through school, education, work, or other legitimate pathways?*

This question acknowledges the central role of aspiration in adolescent development and recognises that peer influence is often strongest where legitimate opportunities are blocked, delayed, or experienced by the child as inaccessible or unattainable.

It also recognises that peer influence often gains its power by offering futures that feel immediate, credible, and achievable to the child when formal systems are experienced as rejecting, inaccessible, or unable to meet their aspirations.

### **H. Digital Meaning and the Expansion of Control**

Digital spaces intensify meaning because they introduce permanence, visibility, and surveillance. Peer systems online can amplify shame, status, coercion, and identity performance.

#### ***Digital meaning mechanisms include:***

- performative identity ('branding' the self)
- public status displays
- scalable humiliation
- constant access and monitoring
- algorithmic reinforcement (exposure to harmful norms)

### **Key question**

*Is there any space, physical, digital, or relational, where the child is free from the influence of this peer system, or does it operate continuously?*

This matters because when peer influence is constant and inescapable, recovery and disengagement cannot be achieved through motivation or insight alone. It requires deliberate structural changes that reduce exposure and create genuine spaces of safety and separation.

By the end of Layer 2, as a practitioner, you should be able to articulate, in defensible language:

- what needs the peer system is meeting
- what identities it rewards and enforces
- what incentives and punishments regulate behaviour
- what promises bind the child to the group
- what costs and threats make disengagement unsafe

In other words, Layer 2 helps providing an explanation of why the peer field holds together, not just that it exists.

*A concise synthesis statement would sound like:*

This peer system is meaningful to the child because it provides [belonging/protection/status/material support/aspiration], enforces [identity script], and regulates behaviour through [reward/punishment]. Disengagement carries [specific costs/risks], which explains the child's continued involvement despite identified harm.'

*This way, the analysis moved toward describing the mechanisms of influence rather than asserting 'bad peers' or locating causality solely in the child or family.*

### **Layer 3: The Consequence Trajectory**

*(This is about what the peer system produces over time for this child)*

If Layer 1 tells us where the child is positioned, and Layer 2 tells us why the position holds, Layer 3 focuses on what that position is doing to the child over time. This is essential because harm in peer systems is rarely instantaneous. It is cumulative, normalising, and trajectory-shaping.

Layer 3 is therefore about enforcing the child's timescale, not the professional or system one.

***Here the focus is on the following five critical questions:***

- **Direction:** Is the child's situation stabilising, deteriorating, or becoming entrenched?
- **Accumulation:** What is building up for the child through repetition and exposure?
- **Normalisation:** What harms are becoming ordinary or expected?

- **Constraint/Barrier:** How is the child's future narrowing as a result of continued positioning?
- **Exit viability:** How does time change the cost and feasibility of leaving?

### **A. Accumulation of Exposure and Harm**

Peer systems exert influence through **repetition**. What initially feels exceptional becomes routine, what initially feels risky becomes familiar. Over time, exposure accumulates even if individual incidents appear 'low level'.

#### ***Accumulation may include:***

- increasing time spent in risky environments
- repeated exposure to violence, exploitation, or criminal activity
- progressive desensitisation to harm
- increasing tolerance of coercion, threat, or degradation
- growing involvement in activities the child once resisted

#### **Key question**

*What experiences, behaviours, or environments is this child now being repeatedly exposed to that were not part of their life previously?*

This question shifts analysis away from isolated incidents and towards the identification of emerging patterns, allowing practitioners to understand how repeated exposure, rather than single events, contributes to escalating risk and cumulative harm.

### **B. Normalisation and Moral Drift**

As exposure accumulates, peer systems often recalibrate what feels 'normal'. This process is subtle and often invisible to professionals unless explicitly analysed.

#### ***Normalisation may involve:***

- violence being reframed as justified or necessary
- exploitation being minimised or reframed as 'choice'
- secrecy being reframed as loyalty
- harm being reframed as humour or 'part of life'
- adults and services being reframed as irrelevant or dangerous.

The child may not describe distress, however they may describe acceptance, and acceptance does not preclude impact of harm.

### **Key question**

*What does this child now see as normal that they would not have accepted or expected a year ago?*

This question helps identify gradual normalisation of harm and shifting boundaries without blaming the child or relying on single incidents.

### **C. Identity Consolidation and Foreclosure**

Peer systems do not only influence behaviour, over time, they also consolidate identity. What may begin as experimentation can become self-definition.

#### ***Identity foreclosure occurs when:***

- the child becomes known (to peers, school, police, services) through a narrow identity
- alternative identities (student, athlete, carer, creative child) are crowded out
- reputation becomes fixed and difficult to escape
- future choices are interpreted through past behaviour

This is particularly dangerous because once identity hardens, systems begin to respond differently, with lower expectations, greater surveillance, and quicker escalation.

### **Key question**

*How is this child now being seen or labelled by peers, schools, services, or the community, and what opportunities does that begin to limit?*

This question focuses on recognising identity consolidation as a core developmental process and makes visible how reputational labels, once formed, can shape expectations, responses, and life chances over time.

### **D. Escalation and System Response Feedback Loops**

As peer influence continues, professional and institutional responses often intensify but not always in protective ways. The key is to examine feedback loops between peer systems and formal systems.

***Common loops include:***

- peer involvement to school exclusion to increased unsupervised peer time
- peer involvement to police contact to increased status within peer group
- peer involvement to placement moves to loss of protective relationships
- peer involvement to service withdrawal to deeper peer dependency

These loops matter because they can accelerate harm even when interventions are well-intentioned.

**Key question**

*How have professional or system responses altered this child's exposure to peers over time?*

This question is essential because it prevents escalation from being attributed solely to the child or family, and instead makes visible how well-intentioned system actions may have increased risk, reduced protection, or strengthened harmful peer ties.

**E. Increasing Exit Friction Over Time**

Time changes the cost of leaving. What might have been possible early on can become dangerous or impossible later.

***Exit friction increases as:***

- debts accumulate (material, social, sexual, reputational)
- threats become more explicit
- surveillance intensifies
- identity becomes tied to the peer system
- alternative supports erode or blame the child

A critical mistake in practice is assuming exit feasibility is static. It is not. It is time-sensitive.

**Key question**

*What aspects of this peer system were previously optional for the child but have since become difficult or unsafe to disengage from?*

This question anchors urgency to the child's trajectory rather than a single crisis point, highlighting how time, accumulation, and constraint progressively reduce a child's ability to step away without harm.

## **F. Developmental Opportunity Cost**

Perhaps the most under-recognised consequence is what the child misses while embedded in the peer system.

***Opportunity cost may include:***

- disrupted education and skill development
- loss of pro-social peer relationships
- delayed emotional maturation or accelerated learning of older behaviours
- reduced exposure to lawful aspiration pathways
- early criminalisation or stigmatisation

These losses which are often invisible in short-term assessments are decisive in long-term outcomes.

### **Key question**

*What developmental opportunities, experiences, or pathways is this child missing or being pushed out of as time passes?*

This question reframes harm not only as exposure to risk, but as the gradual loss of growth, learning, and future possibility that accumulates when a child's world becomes increasingly narrowed.

## **G. Forecasting: What This Becomes If Nothing Changes**

Key here for practitioners is to move from description to forecasting. This is not prediction in a deterministic sense but evidence-based projection.

***Forecasting considers:***

- likely escalation pathways
- increasing system involvement
- transition points (e.g. adolescence to adulthood)

- points of no return versus windows of intervention

### **The central forecasting question**

*If this peer system remains unchanged, what future is this child most likely moving towards on their current trajectory?*

This question is not about fear-based practice or prediction. It is about responsible anticipation using available evidence to consider how patterns, exposure, and constraint are likely to shape the child's future if no meaningful change occurs.

### **This layer will help you to be able to articulate:**

- whether the trajectory is stabilising, worsening, or entrenching
- what harms are accumulating and normalising
- how identity and opportunity are being shaped
- how system responses are interacting with peer influence
- how exit feasibility is changing over time
- why timing matters now, not later

### ***An example statement might sound like:***

'Over time, this peer system is producing increased exposure to [X], normalising [Y], and consolidating an identity associated with [Z]. System responses have unintentionally increased peer exposure. Exit is becoming more constrained due to [specific factors]. Without timely disruption and replacement support, the child's trajectory is likely to narrow further within the next [timeframe].'

*This Layer connects where the child is positioned and why that position holds to what it produces over time, anchoring analysis in time-based consequence. In doing so, it reflects the core ethical responsibility of children's social work which is to understand not only present risk, but how patterns, delay, and inaction shape a child's future.*

## **The Model**

With all three layers fully articulated, I believe that the model offers a coherent and child-centred account of peer influence.

**Layer 1** establishes where the child is positioned within a peer field they do not control.



**Layer 2** explains why that position holds, by identifying the meanings, protections, and demands the peer system creates for the child.

**Layer 3** traces what is the impact of the positioning over time, making visible how risk, identity, and opportunity are shaped through accumulation and delay.

Taken together, this model provides a innovative framework for understanding peer influence as a relational and developmental process with the aim of inviting practitioners to intervene earlier, more proportionately, and in ways that remain centred to the child's lived experience and future trajectory.

## **The Peer Influence Assessment Tool (A Three Step Practice Tool)**

This tool is designed to translate the three-layer peer system model into a structured, practice-ready method for assessment, supervision, and decision-making in children's social work. Its core aim is to support in practice to move beyond describing peer associations and instead develop a clear, evidence-based understanding of how peer influence operates for a specific child, at a specific point in time.

The tool is based in the recognition that peer influence is rarely incidental and is never neutral. It is shaped by structure, meaning, and time, and it interacts dynamically with children's developmental stage, lived experience, and the systems around them.

When peer influence is under-analysed, safeguarding responses risk becoming either moralising ('poor choices') or delayed ('no significant incident yet'). This tool aims to provide a way to prevent both.

This tool builds on the three layers of the model:

- **Layer 1: The Peer Field**

This is understanding where the child is positioned within peer systems, including physical and digital spaces

- **Layer 2: The Meaning System**

This is understanding why those peer systems hold power for the child, including what needs they meet and what adaptations they demand

- **Layer 3: The Consequence Trajectory**

This is understanding what that positioning is producing over time for the child's safety, identity, and future

**The Peer Influence Assessment Tool aims to:**

- Support early, proportionate analysis of peer influence before harm escalates
- Make visible mechanisms of influence, rather than relying on labels such as 'bad peers' or 'gang association'
- Integrate digital and physical peer worlds into a single analytical frame
- Account explicitly for development, trauma, poverty, and intersectionality without individualising blame
- Prevent drift by anchoring decisions to trajectory and time, not isolated incidents
- Produce analysis that is defensible in supervision, audit, and court, because it helps explain *why* concerns exist, not just *that* they exist

**How the tool works**

The tool follows a structured sequence that mirrors how peer influence actually operates:

- First, it maps **where influence is happening and how it is structured**, including digital spaces
- Second, it examines **why influence holds**, by analysing the child's susceptibility, needs, and adaptations as peer influence moves between digital and physical worlds
- Finally, it tests **how fragile or entrenched the situation is**, and what margin exists for safe disruption or change

Each step is intentionally cumulative. In practice, you should not move forward without clarity at the previous step, as doing so risks action without understanding.

This is a thinking and reflective tool to support practice explore peer groups and ecosystems more in depth and what it means for and to the child.

### **Step One: Mapping the Peer Field (Including Digital Spaces)**

*(This is all about where peer influence is operating and how it is structured)*

Step One translates Layer 1: The Peer Field into a concrete analytical task. Its purpose is not to judge relationships, but to map the social terrain the child is currently living within.

Before asking why peer influence matters or what it is producing, in practice we must first understand where influence is occurring, how it is organised, and how inescapable it is for the child.

This step is foundational. If the peer field is misunderstood, everything that follows risks being distorted either by minimising structural constraint/barriers or by individualising responsibility.

#### **The aim of Step One**

Step One aims to establish:

- **The shape of the peer field** the child is positioned within
- **The routes through which influence reaches the child**, both physical and digital
- **Who holds power, visibility, or control** within that peer field
- **How easy or difficult it is for the child to reduce exposure or disengage**

Most importantly, this step deliberately treats digital spaces as peer spaces, not as add-ons or background context. For many children, peer influence is now continuous, hybrid, and boundary-less, moving seamlessly between online and offline worlds.

#### **1. Identifying the Peer Field (Not 'Friends')**

The first task is to move away from listing individual peers and instead identify the peer field as a system.

***This includes:***

- Friendship groups
- Looser associations
- Online-only peers
- Older or peripheral peers who exert influence without regular physical presence

***Key questions include:***

- Where does this child spend time socially, not just physically?
- Who do they communicate with daily, weekly, or late at night?
- Which peers are visible in their life, and which are hidden or indirect?

At this stage, it is important not to filter for 'risk'. The task is mapping, not interpretation.

## **2. Mapping Digital Peer Spaces**

Digital spaces must be mapped with the same seriousness as physical ones.

***This includes:***

- Messaging platforms (e.g. group chats, private messages)
- Social media platforms
- Gaming environments and voice chats
- Shared accounts, devices, or passwords
- Location sharing or digital surveillance

***Key questions include:***

- Which digital spaces does the child use to connect with peers?
- Are there group chats or platforms where the child feels expected to be present?
- Is contact constant, time-limited, time-specific, or concentrated at night?
- Are there digital artefacts (images, messages, videos) that hold power or control?

***A critical question at this stage is:***

*Is there any space, digital or physical, where the child is not reachable by this peer system?*

If the answer is no, then peer influence is operating 24/7, which has direct implications for safety, recovery, and exit.

### 3. Mapping Physical Pathways

Next, identify how the peer field is accessed and sustained in the physical world.

***This includes:***

- School and alternative education settings
- Neighbourhoods and informal meeting places
- Transport routes (buses, trains, lifts from older peers)
- After-school, evening, or unsupervised periods
- Service-related locations (PRUs, placements, youth provision)

***Key questions include:***

- Where does the child most often encounter peers?
- Are there predictable times or places where peer exposure increases?
- Has school exclusion, timetable changes, or placement instability increased unsupervised peer contact?

This is where professional and system actions often begin to shape the peer field, sometimes unintentionally.

### 4. Identifying Power, Centrality, and Dependency

Not all positions in a peer field carry the same risk.

***At this stage, consider:***

- Is the child central, peripheral, or dependent within the peer field?
- Who appears to set norms, control access, or influence behaviour?
- Are there older peers, or peers with resources, status, or protection?
- Is the child reliant on the peer field for transport, safety, money, belonging, or connection?

***A key question is:***

*Who would notice first if this child tried to disengage, and what would they do?*

This question identifies whether the peer field is loosely influential or structurally controlling, without requiring the child to name coercion.

## 5. Assessing Visibility, Surveillance, and Exit Friction

The final task in Step One is to assess how visible the child is within the peer field, and how difficult it would be to reduce exposure.

***Consider:***

- Whether the child's movements or communications are monitored
- Whether withdrawal would be noticed quickly
- Whether there are expectations of immediate response
- Whether there are social, material, or reputational costs to disengagement

***This leads to a mini assessment of exit friction:***

- **Low:** disengagement likely unnoticed or tolerated
- **Moderate:** disengagement brings social cost but limited threat
- **High:** disengagement likely triggers retaliation, exposure, or loss of protection

Remember, exit friction is a structural property of the peer field, not a reflection of the child's motivation.

By the end of Step One, practitioners should be able to state clearly:

- The **main digital and physical peer spaces** the child is embedded in
- The **routes through which peer influence operates**
- The child's **position** within the peer field
- The presence or absence of **control, surveillance, or dependency**
- The **level of exit friction** the child currently faces

Crucially, Step One does not ask whether the peer field is 'good' or 'bad'. It establishes where influence lives and how tightly it holds.

## Step Two: The Mechanism of Influence

*(This step is about how peer influence works)*

In Step Two we are concerned with mechanism, not motivation. The purpose is to explain *how* peer influence operates on this child at this point in time, rather than attributing behaviour to attitude, character, or 'choice'.

This step recognises that peer influence gains its power by aligning with development, trauma adaptation, structural inequality, and unmet need, often reinforced across both digital and physical worlds.

In this step, the focus is understanding that peer influence does not become consequential simply through exposure but it becomes consequential when it meets needs, regulates emotion, offers identity, or provides something the child experiences as unavailable elsewhere.

This step explicitly recognises that peer influence often moves from digital spaces into the physical world and back again, reinforcing loyalty, obligation, fear, and aspiration across both environments.

Peer influence is rarely a single force. It is a stack of mechanisms operating simultaneously. In this step the aim is to surface those mechanisms clearly, so they can be disrupted or replaced, rather than misunderstood or moralised.

What follows are not 'risk factors', but mechanisms through which peer systems shape behaviour, loyalty, and persistence.

## **The aim of Step Two**

Step Two aims to help analysing:

- **What the peer system offers the child**, psychologically, socially, and materially
- **What adaptations the child is making** in order to belong and remain safe
- **How digital and physical peer worlds reinforce each other**
- **Why disengagement may feel impossible or dangerous**, even when harm is recognised

## **How to use Step Two**

Practitioners should work through each mechanism area below and identify:

- Which mechanisms are present
- How they operate for and on this child
- Where they are reinforced digitally, physically, or both
- Which mechanisms are strongest and most binding
- Why these mechanism matters for the child's safety, wellbeing, and capacity to disengage

Sometimes not all mechanisms will be present. The task is not to tick boxes, but to **map the dominant pulls**.

### Developmental Positioning: Why Peers Matter Now

Children's susceptibility to peer influence changes across development. At certain developmental stages, particularly adolescence, peers are not merely influentially but developmentally prioritised.

The child's brain is organised around immediacy, social evaluation, and belonging. This means that peer response carries disproportionate emotional and motivational weight compared to adult instruction or future consequence.

In practice, we need to consider how the child's current developmental stage shapes decision-making, risk tolerance, and responsiveness to peers.

#### ***Key developmental considerations include:***

- **Sensation-seeking:** increased sensitivity to novelty, excitement, and peer approval
- **Risk calculus:** prioritising short-term reward over long-term consequence
- **Executive function:** still-developing impulse control, planning, and foresight

#### ***For the child, this often means:***

- peer approval feels urgent and emotionally real
- adult concern feels abstract, distant, or negotiable
- short-term gains (belonging, excitement, recognition) outweigh long-term risks
- the presence (or imagined presence) of peers alters judgement in real time
- saying 'No' requires cognitive and emotional capacities still under construction



This mechanism is biological and developmental, not attitudinal.

### ***What to assess***

You must assess not just age, but how development is operating in context, including:

- the child's sensitivity to peer validation, rejection, and status
- how quickly decision-making accelerates in peer settings
- whether impulse control collapses under social observation
- whether risk awareness is present but overridden in the moment
- whether behaviour differs markedly between peer-present and adult-only contexts

### ***How to assess***

- Compare behaviour across contexts (school, home, peer spaces, online)
- Identify incidents linked to visibility (group settings, filming, posting)
- Test whether insight expressed in calm settings holds under pressure
- Observe whether decisions are described as "just happening" or automatic

### ***Reflective questions***

- What feels more real to this child in the moment: peer reaction or adult consequence?
- Are we confusing verbal insight from the child with developmental capacity?
- How does this child's age and stage amplify the impact of peer feedback?

## **Domain 2: Trauma Adaptation and Emotional Regulation**

For children with experiences of trauma, neglect, loss, or chronic stress, peer systems often function as regulation systems. They help the child manage fear, numb distress, avoid abandonment, or create a sense of safety and predictability where other relationships have failed.

### ***For the child, this may mean:***

- compliance in the peer group feels safer than resistance
- loyalty is experienced as protection, not choice

- intensity, risk, or substances regulate overwhelming emotion
- belonging substitutes for disrupted attachment
- separation from peers triggers dysregulation rather than relief

In these cases, the peer system is not just a social group but also a psychological infrastructure.

### ***What to assess***

- trauma history and attachment disruption
- emotional states before, during, and after peer contact
- escalation of distress when peer contact is reduced
- whether peer loyalty functions as emotional safety
- whether disengagement is experienced as threat

### ***How to assess***

- track emotional regulation patterns across the day
- observe responses to boundaries or reduced access
- identify spikes in behaviour following perceived rejection
- triangulate emotional presentation across carers, school, and professionals

### ***Reflective questions***

- What emotional work is this peer system doing or providing for the child?
- What would happen to the child's regulation if this system were removed tomorrow?

## **Domain 3: Poverty, Scarcity, and Survival**

In contexts of poverty, deprivation, or material instability, peer systems often operate as informal welfare and access networks. They provide resources, mobility, protection, or opportunity that families and services cannot consistently provide.

### ***For the child, this means:***

- peer involvement solves immediate, concrete problems
- risk is weighed against hunger, boredom, isolation, or exclusion
- disengagement feels materially dangerous
- 'choice' is constrained by scarcity, not preference
- survival logic replaces moral logic

This means that risk-taking should be also seen as adaptive behaviour under constraint.

### ***What to assess***

- what material needs peers meet (money, food, transport, devices)
- dependence on peers for movement across neighbourhoods
- financial obligations or informal debts
- immediate losses if peer contact stopped
- gaps in service provision that peers fill

### ***How to assess***

- map the child's day-to-day access to essentials
- identify who provides what, how often, and at what cost
- test what happens on days without peer contact
- examine links between financial stress and peer engagement

### ***Reflective questions***

- What becomes impossible for this child without this peer system?
- Are we interpreting survival strategies as risk taking?

## **Domain 4: Identity, Role, and Belonging**

Peer systems offer and do identity work. They define who the child must be to belong and what behaviours are required to maintain acceptance. Over time, these expectations become internalised and defended.

### ***For the child, this can mean:***

- performing toughness, silence, or loyalty
- suppressing fear, care, or vulnerability
- adopting language, posture, or behaviours tied to postcode, race, or reputation
- experiencing identity threat if they step away
- feeling that belonging requires becoming someone else

Belonging becomes conditional and costly.

### ***What to assess***

- identity expectations within the peer group
- roles the child occupies and how fixed they are
- consequences of deviating from the script
- changes in self-presentation over time
- emotional cost of non-conformity

### ***How to assess***

- listen for identity claims ('this is who I am', 'people like us...')
- observe differences across contexts
- explore what happens when the child acts differently
- map reputational labels attached to the child

### ***Reflective questions***

- How does this child have to act to belong here?
- What parts of themselves are being silenced, changed, or erased?

## **Domain 5: Reward, Punishment, and Coercive Exchange**

Peer influence frequently operates through structured incentives and penalties. Protection, money, or status may be conditional on compliance, while resistance brings threat, humiliation, or exclusion.

### ***For the child, this means:***

- safety is exchanged for obedience
- mistakes carry escalating consequences
- loyalty is enforced through fear, debt, or shame
- protection becomes a form of control

This is not friendship, but coercive exchange presented as belonging.

### ***What to assess***

- what behaviours are rewarded
- what behaviours are punished
- the costs of refusal or mistake
- presence of threats, debts, or manipulation
- digital leverage used to enforce compliance

### ***How to assess***

- ask what happens when someone says no
- explore consequences of errors or withdrawal
- identify digital ways used for control
- track escalation of demands over time

### ***Reflective questions***

- What does this peer system reward and what does it punish?
- What is the real price of the protection offered?

## **Domain 6: Digital–Physical Continuity**

Digital spaces extend peer influence beyond physical presence. They enable constant surveillance, rapid escalation, and durable control.

### ***For the child, this means:***

- peer presence is continuous, not episodic
- disengagement is visible and punishable
- shame and coercion are amplified
- harm can travel quickly between online and offline worlds causing reputational loss, harm, isolation, bullying, coercion etc

### ***What to assess***

- platforms and group structures used
- frequency and timing of contact (especially night-time)
- digital ways used to maintain control
- links between online activity and offline behaviour

### ***How to assess***

- map digital exposure across a 24-hour or 7 days period
- identify online triggers for physical meetings
- assess device safety and access control
- explore digital retaliation risks

### ***Reflective questions***

- Is this child ever truly free from the peer system?
- How does digital contact intensify physical risk?

## Domain 7: Intersectionality and Targeting

Peer systems exploit inequality. Race, disability, gender, language, migration status, and postcode shape who is targeted, protected, believed, or punished.

### *For the child, this can mean:*

- adultification or sexualisation
- criminalisation of behaviour others are supported with
- seeking peers for protection from discrimination
- having harm normalised because of identity

### *What to assess*

- identity-based vulnerabilities
- differential system responses
- experiences of racism, exclusion, or surveillance
- how identity shapes peer risk and protection

### *How to assess*

- compare responses to similar behaviours in other children
- examine whose accounts are believed
- reflect on professional assumptions
- explore the child's sense of safety in institutions

### *Reflective questions*

- Would this be interpreted differently if this child were someone else?
- Where might harm be normalised through low expectations?

## Domain 8: Aspiration, Status, and Promised Futures

Peer systems often promise futures that feel unavailable elsewhere. They offer status, income, belonging, or respect where education or work feels blocked or humiliating.

### *For the child, this means:*

- peers appear to offer a viable path
- institutions feel as rejecting or irrelevant
- short-term meaning outweighs long-term harm

### ***What to assess***

- futures promised by peers
- futures perceived as inaccessible
- experiences of failure or exclusion
- what status hierarchies drive engagement

### ***How to assess***

- ask what success looks like to the child
- explore who they admire and why
- examine disengagement from education or training
- map credibility of alternative futures

### ***Reflective questions***

- What future does this peer system make the child feel possible?
- Why these futures feel closed elsewhere?

## **Domain 9: System Contribution and Reinforcement**

Professional systems can unintentionally strengthen peer influence through exclusion, instability, delay, or criminalisation.

### ***For the child, this can mean:***

- peers feel more reliable than services
- exclusion increases exposure
- criminalisation increases status
- instability deepens reliance on peers

### ***What to assess***

- impact of professional decisions on peer exposure
- service gaps and delays
- unintended consequences of interventions

### ***How to assess***

- compare exposure before and after key decisions
- map increases in risk following system action or inaction
- test whether interventions reduce or increase peer access

### ***Reflective questions***

- How might our actions be reinforcing the peer system?
- Are we individualising a network problem?

### **Domain10 : Emotional Regulation and Arousal**

Beyond belonging or identity, peer systems often function as emotional regulators. They shape how the child feels in their body and mind.

#### ***For some children, the peer system:***

- reduces anxiety through constant contact and availability
- replaces emotional numbness with intensity, excitement, or risk
- helps the child avoid internal distress such as grief, shame, or fear
- provides predictability and rhythm in otherwise chaotic lives

The child may not describe this as ‘feeling better’ however they may describe it as feeling something, feeling calm, or not feeling alone.

#### ***What to assess***

- emotional states associated with peer contact (calm, excitement, relief)
- emotional states associated with absence or separation (panic, emptiness, agitation)
- use of risk, substances, or intensity to regulate affect
- reliance on constant contact to manage distress

#### ***How to assess***

- track mood and emotional arousal before, during, and after peer contact
- observe reactions to reduced access (phones, boundaries, disruptions)
- explore what the child does when they feel overwhelmed or bored
- triangulate emotional presentation across settings

### ***Reflective questions***

- What emotional states does this peer system help the child manage, escape, or feel alive within?
- If this regulation were removed, what distress would surface?



## Domain 11: Narrative Control and Meaning-Making

Peer systems often provide a coherent story that helps the child make sense of their life, their struggles, and the world.

### *Peers may offer:*

- explanations for failure or exclusion ('the system is against us')
- justifications for harm ('this is how things work')
- moral clarity ('we look after our own')
- identity coherence ('this is who we are')

Remember, for a child living with uncertainty, shame, or repeated rejection, this narrative can feel stabilising and protective.

### *What to assess*

- the stories the child tells about themselves and their circumstances
- language that frames harm as normal, deserved, or inevitable
- moral binaries (us vs them, snitches, outsiders)
- narratives that excuse or legitimise risk

### *How to assess*

- listen carefully to how the child explains events and choices
- notice repeated phrases or shared explanations across the peer group
- compare peer narratives with institutional narratives (school, services)
- explore what the narrative protects the child from feeling

### *Reflective questions*

- What story about themselves and the world does this peer system give the child?
- What would become confusing or painful if that story were challenged?

## Domain 12: Fear-Based Attachment (Threat and Belonging)

Some peer systems bind children through the dual mechanism of comfort and fear operating together.

### *Belonging may depend on:*

- subtle threats framed as care
- conditional affection ('we've got you, unless...')
- loyalty tests disguised as protection
- blurred lines between safety and danger

Here, the child may feel both protected *and* trapped.

### ***What to assess***

- signs of fear coexisting with attachment
- conditional language around care and safety
- silence, secrecy, or avoidance when peers are discussed
- escalation when loyalty is questioned

### ***How to assess***

- explore what happens when someone breaks rules or leaves
- observe emotional shifts when loyalty is discussed
- look for minimisation of harm alongside fear of consequences
- triangulate with contextual intelligence about retaliation patterns

### ***Reflective questions***

- Where does belonging in this peer system depend on fear, silence, or compliance?
- What does the child believe would happen if they were disloyal?

The key is to capture coercive bonding without requiring explicit disclosure, which many children cannot safely give.

## **Domain 13: Role Allocation Within the Peer System**

Children are rarely interchangeable in peer systems. They are given roles that organise risk, responsibility, and replaceability.

### ***A child may be positioned as:***

- the runner, the tough one, the protector, the good looking one etc
- the one who absorbs blame or risk
- the one whose loyalty is tested most
- the one who is most expendable

Important to remember that roles shape exposure and constrain exit.

### ***What to assess***

- the child's function within the peer group
- consistency of role across time and contexts
- concentration of risk or responsibility on the child
- whether the role benefits others more than the child

### ***How to assess***

- ask what the child is 'known for' within the group
- map who does what when risk is present
- identify who would be blamed if something went wrong
- assess whether others could easily replace the child

### ***Reflective questions***

- What role does this child play in the peer system?
- How easy would it be for that role to be replaced?

Role clarity can predicts **risk concentration** and explains why some children are more exposed than others or might suffer more consequences than others

## **Domain 14: Comparison With Realistic Alternatives**

Peer systems do not exist in a vacuum. Their power depends on how they compare to what else is actually available.

### ***For the child:***

- school may feel humiliating, rejecting, or unsafe
- work pathways may feel blocked or unrealistic
- family relationships may feel fragile or conditional
- services may feel punitive, slow, or untrustworthy

A key reflection here is that peers could win by default when alternatives feel worse.

### ***What to assess***

- the child's lived experience of school, work, family, and services

- where the child experiences dignity, success, or belonging
- credibility of proposed alternatives
- gaps between adult assumptions and child reality

### ***How to assess***

- ask the child where they feel respected
- explore past experiences of rejection or failure
- test whether alternatives operate on the child's timescale
- compare emotional and practical returns across options

### ***Reflective questions***

- Compared to the peer system, what alternatives does the child experience as viable right now?
- Where are we assuming options that do not exist?

## **Domain 15: Temporal Pull (Immediacy vs Delay)**

Peer systems operate on immediate timeframes. Institutions operate on delayed ones.

### ***For the child, this looks like:***

- rewards are instant and visible
- belonging is felt now
- consequences feel distant or abstract
- adult promises feel uncertain or conditional

### ***What to assess***

- immediacy of peer rewards versus institutional benefits
- certainty of outcomes now versus promises later
- how the child experiences waiting
- tolerance for delayed gratification

### ***How to assess***

- explore how quickly peers respond versus services
- ask what happens 'straight away' versus 'eventually'
- examine frustration with slow processes
- identify moments where delay increased peer reliance

### ***Reflective questions***

- How does the immediacy of what peers offer outweigh longer-term but uncertain alternatives?
- Are we asking the child to wait longer than they can safely wait?

Remember, analysis should focus on the child's time, not adult planning horizons and wishful thinking.

### **Domain 16: Loyalty as Moral Identity**

In some peer systems, loyalty becomes a moral value, not just a behaviour.

#### **For the child:**

- silence equals honour
- disclosure equals betrayal
- endurance equals strength
- protecting peers becomes self-worth

Breaking loyalty is experienced as moral collapse and not moral relief. .

#### ***What to assess***

- moral language around loyalty and betrayal
- shame attached to speaking out
- identity built around endurance or silence
- peer framing of disclosure as harm

#### ***How to assess***

- listen for moral judgments about "snitching"
- explore how the child evaluates good and bad behaviour
- notice defensiveness when loyalty is questioned
- assess whether harm is justified through moral framing

### ***Reflective questions***

- How has loyalty been moralised within this peer system?
- What would breaking it mean for the child's sense of self?

This could explain why children protect harmful peers even at great personal cost.

## **Domain 17: Exit Capacity and Risk Transfer**

*This is about whether disengagement is realistically possible without creating new harm*

Peer influence cannot be meaningfully assessed without an honest appraisal of exit capacity. This domain tests whether disengagement from the peer system is a real-world possibility for the child at this point in time, or whether attempts to exit would generate immediate harm, displacement of risk, or escalation.

Professionals often mistake insight for capacity. A child may want to leave, understand the risks, or verbally agree to disengage, while lacking any safe or viable means to do so. Exit, in this context, is not a motivational decision but it becomes a structural feasibility question.

### ***What to assess***

The child's actual capacity to disengage from the peer system without triggering significant harm to themselves or others. This includes assessing not only the child's position, but the wider relational, material, and systemic consequences of exit.

### ***Key areas of assessment include:***

- **Retaliation risk:**

Whether disengagement would expose the child to threats, violence, sexual harm, humiliation, or coercion, including digital retaliation.

- **Immediate losses:**

What the child would lose at the point of exit, such as:

- protection from other threats
  - access to money, food, transport, or shelter
  - belonging, identity, or status
  - emotional regulation or attachment substitutes
- **Availability of alternatives:**

Whether there are realistic, accessible, and immediate alternatives that could meet the same needs currently met by the peer system (not hypothetical services or future plans).

- **Risk transfer and fallout:**

Whether exit would displace risk onto:

- siblings or other children
- family members or carers
- the child in different environments (e.g. school, placement, neighbourhood)

- ***System readiness:***

Whether services are currently able to absorb the risk created by exit, or whether disengagement would leave the child more exposed due to gaps, delays, or thresholds.

### ***How to assess***

*Assessment at this stage must be concrete, not aspirational.*

### ***You should actively test:***

- What has happened to other children who have tried to disengage from similar peer systems
- What the peer system has done historically when loyalty is broken
- Whether the child has ever attempted partial withdrawal, and what the response was
- Whether digital artefacts (images, messages, shared accounts) increase vulnerability
- Whether adults proposing exit would remain present and protective when consequences arise

### ***This requires triangulation with:***

- the child's account
- professional observation
- contextual intelligence
- historical patterns within the peer field

### ***Explore***

- What would happen in the first 24 hours if this child disengaged?
- What would happen in the first week?
- Who would notice first, and how would they respond?
- What practical supports would need to be in place *before* disengagement to prevent harm?

### ***Reflective questions:***

- Is disengagement currently possible, risky, or unsafe for this child?
- Would exiting this peer system reduce harm, or simply move it elsewhere?
- Who would carry the immediate risk if the child attempted to leave?
- What would need to change structurally to make exit genuinely viable?

Taken together, these domains demonstrate that peer influence is not a single force but a layered system of psychological, social, material, and moral mechanisms that actively hold the child in place.

The domains make visible the work this system might doing for the child: regulating emotion, meeting needs, offering belonging, structuring identity, providing immediacy, and protecting against threats that feel more real than future risk.

Understanding these mechanisms does not excuse harm, but it explains persistence. Without this analysis, expectations of disengagement rely on motivation and compliance rather than reality, and responsibility is quietly shifted onto the child.

## **The Three Tests Tool**

This test is designed to help shift assessment from focusing on what peer groups exist for the child into what binds the child into these peer groups.

### **Test 1: Activation**

#### **Is this mechanism currently active for this child?**

- Is it operating *now*, not historically?
- Is it influencing real decisions or behaviour?
- Is it referenced implicitly or explicitly by the child?

#### **Prompt**



Is this mechanism shaping how the child thinks, acts, or decides today?

- ☐ Not active
- ☐ Present but peripheral
- ☐ Actively shaping behaviour

## Test 2: Binding Force

**How strongly does this mechanism constrain/limits the child's choices?**

***A mechanism is binding if:***

- Acting against it would carry immediate cost
- Resisting it would threaten safety, belonging, or survival
- The child adapts behaviour to avoid triggering consequences

***Prompt to use here***

If the child acted against this mechanism, what would realistically happen next?

*The information should be classified as per below*

- ☐ Low influence (discomfort only)
- ☐ Moderate influence (social/emotional cost)
- ☐ High binding force (threat, loss, retaliation, exposure)

## Test 3: Replaceability

Replaceability is about planning and how we approach it

*Can this peer influenced mechanism be realistically replaced right now?*

Here, you have to assess whether the *function* the mechanism serves can be met elsewhere **within weeks, not months**.

**Prompt**

If this mechanism were disrupted, what would meet the same need quickly enough to keep the child safe?

- ☐ Readily replaceable
- ☐ Partially replaceable with support
- ☐ Not replaceable

Through this tool, you can determine clearly for each of domains whether:

- **Activation:** Is it operating?
- **Binding force:** How much it constrains or forces choice?
- **Replaceability:** Whether disruption is viable

***In Practice, this should help distinguish:***

- Background context
- Contributing influence
- Primary and secondary constraints from peer influence

### Constraint Profile

Once all domains are tested, this should lead to a Constraint Profile.

***A key question here is:***

*Which 1–3 mechanisms are most binding and least replaceable?*

Those mechanisms are most likely the core contextual safeguarding problem, not the behaviour.

### Example Constraint Profile

For this child, peer influence is primarily constrained by:

*(1) Conditional protection linked to postcode identity (high binding, not replaceable)  
 (2) Poverty-driven material dependence (high binding, partially replaceable), and  
 (3) Trauma-based attachment hunger (moderate binding, replaceable with relational intervention).*

*Digital reinforcement intensifies all three mechanisms. Exit is currently unsafe without clear planning.*

At the end of Step Two you can write your conclusion like this sentence:

*The child's behaviour is best understood as constrained by [X mechanisms], which currently limit their capacity to act differently without significant cost.*

## Step Three: Trajectory, Time, and Consequence

Step Two explains **why the peer system holds**, in step Step Three the aim is to answer two harder questions:

*What does this continued holding do to the child over time and when does waiting itself become harm?*

*What this peer system is producing over time and how long the child can safely remain on this path*

Children do not experience risk as isolated events. They experience it as accumulation of repeated exposure, narrowing options, identity consolidation, and delayed repair.

The central task here is to translate mechanism into time-based consequence.

### The Core Principle of Step Three

*Risk in peer systems is not defined by what happens once but by what continues to happen and what becomes harder to undo.*

**Step Three therefore focuses on:**

- **direction** (where things are going),
- **speed** (how fast harm is accumulating),
- **weight** (what kind of harm is accruing),
- **interruptibility** (how much leverage still exists),
- **time remaining** on the child's developmental clock.

### The Step Three Architecture

#### 1. Trajectory Direction

***Is the child's situation improving, deteriorating, or coasting?***

Children are harmed not only by escalation, but by stagnation. A situation that looks 'stable' may in fact be entrenching risk, normalising harm, and foreclosing futures.

***What to assess***

- **Improving trajectory:** reduced exposure, weakened mechanisms, expanded alternatives.
- **Deteriorating trajectory:** increased exposure, intensified mechanisms, narrowing exits.
- **Coasting trajectory:** harm not escalating, but not reducing; mechanisms remain intact.

### ***How to assess***

- Compare the last 4–6 weeks to the last 3–6 months.
- Track changes in exposure, not just behaviour.
- Identify whether calm reflects containment or genuine change.
- Test whether mechanisms identified in Step Two are weaker, unchanged, or stronger.

### ***Reflective questions***

- If nothing changes, where will this child be in three months?
- Are we mistaking familiarity and survival for safety?

## **2. Harm Accumulation ('Dose' of Risk)**

*How much harm is the child absorbing over time?*

Harm in peer systems often accumulates quietly through repeated exposure rather than dramatic incidents. Even 'low-level' harm becomes significant through repetition.

### ***What to assess***

- **Frequency** of exposure (how often)
- **Duration** (how long each exposure lasts)
- **Intensity** (severity of harm within each exposure)
- **Recovery time** (does the child return to baseline?)

### **This includes:**

- fear, coercion, humiliation
- sexual or criminal exploitation
- sleep deprivation and routine collapse
- substance exposure

- chronic dysregulation
- erosion of trust and safety

### ***How to assess***

- Map a typical week in detail.
- Identify how much of the child's time is peer-occupied.
- Look for cumulative effects (fatigue, numbness, escalation).
- Assess whether there is genuine recovery space and resources

### ***Reflective questions***

- What is this child being repeatedly exposed to that they were not exposed to before?
- Is harm accumulating faster than repair?

## **3. Entrenchment**

*Is the peer system becoming harder to leave?*

As peer systems persist, they often become structurally binding. Exit becomes dangerous not because the child lacks insight, but because leaving carries real cost.

### ***What to assess***

- accumulation of **debt** (financial, reputational, sexual, emotional)
- escalation of **role importance**
- digital leverage (images, messages, surveillance)
- retaliation risk
- identity consolidation within the group

### ***How to assess***

- Ask what the child could walk away from six months ago that they cannot now.
- Identify whether expectations have escalated.
- Assess whether the child is more visible or more replaceable.
- Map digital permanence and exposure.

### ***Reflective questions***

- What has become normal that would not have been acceptable a year ago?

- Is the child becoming less able to exit without harm?

#### **4. Developmental Opportunity Loss**

*What is the child losing while this continues?*

Harm is not only what happens to a child, but what fails to happen. Time spent embedded in harmful peer systems displaces developmental growth.

##### ***What to assess***

Loss of:

- education and skill acquisition
- pro-social identity formation
- safe peer relationships
- hobbies, interests, and talents
- family attachment repair
- credible future pathways

##### ***How to assess***

- Compare the child's current developmental opportunities with age expectations.
- Identify what has been crowded out by peer involvement.
- Assess whether the child's world is shrinking.

##### ***Reflective questions***

- What developmental opportunities is this child losing as time passes?
- Which future doors are quietly closing?

#### **5. System Contribution to Trajectory**

*How are professional responses shaping the child's path?*

Systems can unintentionally intensify peer influence through exclusion, instability, delay, or criminalisation.

##### ***What to assess***

- impact of school exclusion or reduced attendance

- placement moves or instability
- delays in service provision
- criminal justice involvement increasing peer status
- over-reliance on voluntary engagement

#### ***How to assess***

- Compare exposure before and after key system decisions.
- Identify whether interventions reduced or increased peer access.
- Test whether system actions weakened or strengthened Step Two mechanisms.

#### ***Reflective questions***

- How might our actions have increased this child's reliance on peers?
- Are we individualising a network problem?

### **6. Margin for Change (Interruptibility)**

*How much leverage or opportunity to leave the peer system exists right now for the child?*

Some peer systems are interruptible with support whereas others require disruption. Misjudging this leads to over-optimism or premature enforcement.

#### ***What to assess***

- availability of credible alternatives
- presence of protective adults or peers
- responsiveness of services
- fragility of change after short improvements
- complexity of stacked mechanisms

#### ***How to assess***

- Identify what could change **this week, this month**, and **what cannot change without escalation**.
- Test whether small gains hold under pressure.
- Assess whether change reduces exposure or merely relocates it.

#### ***Reflective questions***

- Is this system currently interruptible, or merely containable?
- What would make change durable rather than temporary?

## 7. Child Timescale

*What must change by when and what happens if it doesn't?*

Delay is not neutral. Children live and develop forward whilst systems often wait.

### ***What to assess***

- specific, observable changes required
- realistic timeframes (7–14–28 days)
- evidence needed (not promises)
- agreed escalation points

### ***How to assess***

- Define change in terms of exposure reduction, not intent.
- Require triangulated evidence.
- Treat calm without structural change as coasting.

### **Reflective questions**

- How long can this child safely remain on this trajectory?
- At what point does waiting itself become harm?

### **The Main Forecasting Question**

*If this peer system remains intact, what is the most likely future for this child on their current trajectory?*

Here it is not to predict, but **it is to anticipate**, grounded in evidence, time, and the child's lived reality.

### **How to write in practice**

*The child's continued positioning within this peer system, held in place by the mechanisms identified in Step Two, is producing cumulative harm and developmental loss. The trajectory is [improving / deteriorating / coasting], with [degree] of entrenchment and a [limited / moderate] margin for change. On the child's timescale,*



*change must be evidenced by [specific outcomes] within [timeframe]. Continued delay would increase harm.*

## Contextual Supervision for Peer Influence

Peer influence work fails most often after good analysis, not before it.

*Drift happens when:*

- peer influence becomes treated as 'background context'
- attention shifts back to individual behaviour or parenting
- risk is monitored rather than disrupted
- professionals wait for disclosure instead of reading systems

In practice, peer influence should be a primary object of supervision, and that contextual safeguarding stays active, not theoretical.

In this section supervision is reframed as a mechanism check:

*Are we still intervening in the peer system or have we slipped back into child-only explanations?*

***Traditional supervision asks:***

- *How is the child doing?*
- *What's the plan?*

***Contextual supervision asks***

*How is the peer system operating now, and how have our actions changed it, if at all?*

## The Contextual Supervision Framework

### 1. The Peer Centrality Test

*Is peer influence still central to our analysis and plan?*

This test checks whether peer influence has been quietly downgraded.

***Red flags in supervision:***

- Discussion focuses on the child's behaviour without reference to peers
- Peer involvement is described as 'ongoing' but not analysed
- Plans rely on the child needing to 'choose differently'
- Peer influence is treated as static rather than dynamic

### ***Supervision prompts***

- How is the peer system currently shaping the child's behaviour?
- What has changed in the peer system since last review?
- Are we still treating peer influence as a live safeguarding issue?

## **2. The Mechanism Fidelity Check**

*Are we still targeting the mechanism or only the behaviour?*

This brings Step Two back into the room.

### ***Supervision prompts***

- Which peer mechanisms (domains) are currently dominant (e.g. protection, status, coercion, material provision)?
- Which mechanisms have we weakened?
- Which mechanisms remain untouched?
- Are our interventions actually designed to disrupt these mechanisms?

### ***Key rule to remember***

If the mechanism still operates, behaviour change is unlikely to hold.

## **3. The Digital-Physical Continuity Check**

*Are we falsely separating online and offline peer influence?*

Contextual safeguarding often fails by treating digital harm as secondary.

### ***Supervision prompts***

- How does peer influence move between digital and physical spaces?
- What happens online that sets up offline behaviour (or vice versa)?
- Are digital artefacts (images, messages, group chats) sustaining control?
- Have our interventions addressed the digital layer or ignored it?

### ***Non-negotiable principle***

Peer systems are rarely contained to one space. Neither should safeguarding be.

### **4. The Trajectory Re-Test**

*Is the child's peer-related trajectory changing or just pausing?*

This brings Step Three directly into supervision.

#### ***Supervision prompts***

- Has exposure reduced, or has it just become less visible?
- Is harm accumulating more slowly, or not at all?
- What could the child walk away from now that they couldn't before?
- What would concern us if this pattern continued for another month?

This is to prevent coasting being misread as progress.

### **5. The Exit Reality Check**

*Is exit safer now or are we assuming it is?*

This explicitly revisits exit capacity.

#### ***Supervision prompts***

- Has retaliation risk reduced?
- Has material or emotional dependency shifted?
- Are alternatives actually in place, or just planned?
- Who would absorb risk if exit were attempted this week?

#### **Key insight to remember:**

Wanting to leave is not the same as being able to leave.

### **6. The System Contribution Check**

*How have our actions changed the peer field intentionally or not?*

This aims to prevent systems from escalating risk unintentionally.

### ***Supervision prompts***

- Have exclusions, placement changes, or service delays increased peer exposure?
- Have we removed protective routines without replacing them?
- Are we individualising a network problem

Systems and professionals should be held accountable for the context they create.

## **7. The Child Timescale Integrity Test**

*Are we acting at the speed this peer system requires?*

### ***Supervision prompts***

- What must change in the peer system in the next 7–14 days?
- What evidence would show that change?
- If nothing changes, what is the ethically required next step?

### ***Contextual Supervision Recording example***

*Supervision focused on peer influence as the primary safeguarding concern. We re-tested dominant mechanisms, digital–physical continuity, trajectory, and exit capacity. The peer system remains [more/less] binding because [reasons]. The agreed actions target [specific mechanisms] within [timescale]. If change is not evidenced, escalation will be [specified].*

## **Lastly...**

This peer influence and risk assessment resource aims to bring sustained focus to a critically under-explored area of contextual safeguarding which how peer groups and peer systems actively bring and hold children in their spaces.

Children are rarely harmed only by isolated moments, they are also harmed by patterns that persist while adults hesitate. When peer influence is reduced to ‘bad choices’, ‘negative friends’, or lack of motivation, the forces that regulate emotion, meet needs, structure identity, and redistribute risk remain invisible.

By moving from mapping the peer field, to identifying the mechanisms through which peer systems bind the child, to assessing what that positioning produces over time, this resource aims to bring a new dimension to contextual safeguarding through the child's lived experience and developmental timescale.

The frame here is of responsible anticipation, which means that we should intervene when time itself has become the risk, rather than waiting for harm to announce itself as crisis.

*Peer influence becomes dangerous not when it exists, but when it becomes the most reliable system in a child's life. When we ask why a child does not walk away, we often reveal to the child that we have not yet understood what is holding them there. That itself, is the failure, not the child not walking away.*

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