



A synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding and commonly used child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches

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ABSTRACT

Title: A synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding and commonly used child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches

Background: Contextual Safeguarding is a relatively new approach in the UK that directs attention to extrafamilial contexts outside the control of caregivers. The approach challenges conventional safeguarding thinking and practice for being overly focused on parental failings and instead directs attention to extrafamilial abuse. While Contextual Safeguarding contributes immensely to the existing knowledge base, there are considerable practice implications for its integration within existing safeguarding practice. Hence, there is the need for conceptual clarity about how Contextual Safeguarding fits in with the system-wide safeguarding practice.

Purpose: This conceptual paper argues that Contextual Safeguarding complements existing theoretical models and approaches. Its successful integration with dominant thinking and practice in safeguarding potentially offers new insights to improve system-wide practice.

Design: A theory synthesis design was used to purposively identify, summarise, and compare selected safeguarding theoretical models and approaches to establish both convergence and divergence.

Findings: The arguments provided in this paper suggest that synthesising theory offers a confluence of perspectives that promise to develop a more eclectic and holistic approach to safeguarding practice. The paper demonstrates how Contextual Safeguarding can be integrated with existing theoretical models and approaches.

Conclusion: This paper's conceptual insights include that integrating Contextual Safeguarding with existing theoretical models and approaches can broaden the knowledge base to whole system-wide safeguarding practice in the UK. The paper also confirms that the methodology used is feasible, although more work is required to test its efficacy on a larger scale.

Keywords: *Contextual Safeguarding; Ecological systems; Extrafamilial; Family safeguarding model; Intrafamilial; Social model; Systems theory; Theory synthesis; Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model*

Introduction

Historically, social work's theoretical base draws on other disciplines including psychology, philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, and other fields (Howe, 2009; Thompson, 2020). However, not having a strong theoretical base of its own has often led to questions about social work's professional identity (Parker and Doel, 2013; Webb, 2017). Social workers use theoretical knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of the service users' situations, to inform assessment, subsequent analysis, and planning for interventions.

Musson, (2017, p.4) argues that the application of social work theory to practice is a professional requirement. Similarly, theory alongside evidence from research is seen as one of the main pillars for the knowledge base of social work in the UK (Pawson et al, 2003; Trevithick, 2008). Thompson (2020) cautions against the fallacy of theory-less practice, arguing that social workers should rather view theory as part of the profession's knowledge base, and not solely apply the narrow scientific definition to social work theory. For example, the international definition of social work is explicit about the profession being 'underpinned by theories of social work' (IFSW, 2014) while the Professional Capabilities Framework specifies that social work students should 'apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory' (BASW, 2015). Similarly, Social Work England (2019) professional standards commit social workers to apply knowledge and skills (including theory) of both their own and other professions.

However, social workers often find theory application overwhelming because the multiple and overlapping perspectives often present challenges regarding which theories or models are appropriate for a particular purpose (Pound and Campbell, 2015; Thompson, 2020; Turner, 1991). Social work academics and practitioners tend to use terms such as theories, models, methods, perspectives and approaches interchangeably, further adding to the confusion. Furthermore, because of the interdisciplinary nature of social work, drawing on theories of other disciplines can arguably lead to a fragmented knowledge base (Moller, 2013). Thus, this fragmentation of knowledge can present challenges to the critical application of theoretical frameworks to different situations.

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3 Any **critical discussion of theories can raise** questions regarding what is and
4 what is not theory. There is a considerable amount of published literature
5 defining what theory is and distinguishing it from other terms that are often used
6 interchangeably (Langer and Lietz, 2014; Musson, 2017; Stepney and Ford,
7 2012; Teater, 2019). Stepney and Ford (2012) define theory as 'a framework of
8 understanding or cluster of ideas which attempt to explain reality' (p.xi),
9 Likewise, Langer and Lietz, (2014) describe theory as 'an organized set of ideas
10 that seek to explain a particular phenomenon offering greater direction for
11 practice' (p.9). Teater (2019) asserts the value of a theory is that it describes,
12 explains, and predicts what might happen in different situations.
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21 **Furthermore,** Teater (2019) argues that because of the **ability to predict** what
22 might happen, theories help us understand what action needs to be taken. Most
23 of those terms that are used **as a substitute for theory** such as methods, models,
24 or approaches **denote the action and practice perspectives that represent**
25 **viewpoints that are informed by theory but do not have predictive ability** (Langer
26 and Lietz, 2014; Musson, 2017). Developed from theory, models such as
27 solution-focused practice and motivational interviewing can foster the creation
28 of manuals and frameworks that guide practice (Langer and Lietz, 2014).
29 Sibeon (1990) describes social work methods as representing sets of ideas
30 prescribing appropriate actions in particular situations. **Methods include the**
31 **more formal written accounts about how to do the job and are therefore support**
32 **and promote** practical ways of undertaking tasks such **as using** the Framework
33 for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of
34 Health, 2000), **which is commonly used to guide and frame child safeguarding**
35 **assessments.**
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48 In child safeguarding practice, complementary theories, models, methods,
49 practice perspectives, and approaches are routinely combined. **Safeguarding**
50 **being the work that we do to protect specific children who are suffering, or are**
51 **likely to suffer, significant harm and to promote their wellbeing (HM**
52 **Government, 2018). As Contextual Safeguarding continues to gain currency in**
53 **academic commentary, policy, and practice, the need to explore how this**
54 **approach can be merged with other commonly used theoretical models and**
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3 approaches is even greater. The arguments advanced in this conceptual paper
4 seek to shed light on how the Contextual Safeguarding approach can be
5 integrated with other theoretical models and approaches to further inform child
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9 safeguarding practice.

10 11 **Background**

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13 Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding and responding to
14 young people's experiences of significant harm beyond the confines of their
15 families (Firmin, 2020). The Contextual Safeguarding approach is used to
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18 respond to young people's experiences of risk of significant harm which occurs
19 within the extrafamilial environmental contexts that parents and carers have no
20 control over (NSPCC, 2019; Firmin, 2017; 2020; Firmin and Knowles, 2020).
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23 The central premise of Contextual Safeguarding is that as young people grow
24 and develop, they are in turn, influenced by a whole range of environments and
25 people outside of their families such as school or college, the local community
26 neighbourhoods, their peer groups, or online communities (Firmin, 2020;
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29 NSPCC, 2019). The different relationships that young people form in locations
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32 such as their neighbourhoods, sports grounds, parks, shops, corridors, toilets
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35 in schools and online can lead to violence and abuse (Firmin, 2020).

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37 Underpinning Contextual Safeguarding is the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu
38 which describes the interplay between social rules within the young people's
39 environment (social field) and their decisions and risk-taking behaviours (social,
40 economic, cultural, or symbolic capital) to be accepted and achieve status
41 (habitus) (Firmin, 2017). The model illustrates how young people draw on the
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44 rules from their social field and encounter various 'capitals' in the different
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47 spaces they live in and experience risk as well as the desire to achieve status
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50 and be accepted in their habitus.

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52 These extrafamilial contexts adversely undermine the relationship dynamics
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54 among parents, carers, and their children; hence, the importance of working in
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57 partnerships with parents or caregivers within this approach (Firmin, 2020).
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60 Proponents for Contextual Safeguarding argue that understanding the risks that
children and young people encounter in extrafamilial contexts, therefore,

determines the types of interventions required to keep them safe and free from risk of harm (NSPCC, 2019; Firmin, 2017; 2020; Firmin and Knowles, 2020).

Evidence shows that children who experience extrafamilial abuse may also endure intrafamilial abuse (Department for Education, 2020). For example, there is significant evidence of child sexual abuse occurring within a family environment (Fischer and McDonald, 1998; Hayes, Longfield and Schooling., 2017; Horvath et al., 2014; Longfield, 2015). However, the recent "Characteristics of Children in Need" report (Department for Education, 2020) demonstrates, by and large, intrafamilial forms of abuse such as domestic violence, abuse, and neglect perpetrated by parents continue to constitute the most identified risk factor at the end of the assessment.

Whilst evidence suggests that prevalence of extrafamilial safeguarding concerns increased regarding issues including involvement in gangs, drug misuse by children and trafficking of young people when compared to the previous year, incidence rates were still comparatively lower than cases of intrafamilial abuse (Department for Education, 2020). Home Office (2015) define a gang as having one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified as a group by others. Although the limitation in existing data is that there is no explicit category for intrafamilial or extrafamilial abuses, evidence suggests the former constitutes the largest category of risk for children, hence it is logical that future theoretical safeguarding perspectives must seek to understand both sources of risk to children. Accordingly, this paper examines how social workers can synthesise theoretical approaches and practice models that deal with both intrafamilial and extrafamilial abuse more effectively.

The term "synthesis" means to combine separate elements to form a whole (Henning, 1999); suggesting that theory synthesis involves combining aspects of different theoretical models and approaches to create a fuller new theoretical understanding. Payne (2021) describes taking ideas from several theories and combining them as eclecticism while arguing that the challenge is in using them both, eclectically, yet selectively. Langer and Lietz (2014) assert the eclectic

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3 approach to combining complementary theories as offering 'more breath and
4 flexibility and providing multiple perspectives to different preferences and
5 situations' (p.20). However, Langer and Lietz, (2014) acknowledge that while
6 theories may supplement each other by making up for individual limitations and
7 broadening theoretical understanding, this requires broad competence in each
8 theory that is applied to ensure success.
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14 Theory synthesis is not new; despite limited literature in the field of social work,
15 there is evidence of merging theoretical perspectives in related disciplines such
16 as health and medicine (George and Engel, 1980; Pound and Campbell, 2015).
17 Synthesis has been driven by the desire for theoretically informed interventions
18 (Pound and Campbell, 2015), and involves conceptual integration across
19 multiple theoretical perspectives (Jaakkola, 2020). For instance, the
20 biopsychosocial approach synthesised biomedical and psychosocial theories
21 out of the inadequacies and limitations of the traditional biomedical model, the
22 dominant model in medicine today (George and Engel, 1980; Fava and Sonino,
23 2007). Similarly, the Ecological systems theories by Soporin (1979) and
24 Bronfenbrenner (1979) emerged out of the synthesis of the ecological and
25 systems perspective because of similarities between these two distinct theories
26 (Munford, O'Donoghue, and Nash, 2005).
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38 However, the philosophical grounds for theory synthesis have been challenged.
39 Positivists question the truthfulness of results achieved from merging different
40 theories (Payne, 2021; Smith, 2003) and similarly the validity of combining
41 multiple theories has also been questioned (Moravcsik, 2003; Payne, 2021;
42 Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). On the other hand, pragmatists highlight the
43 benefits of combining different approaches in areas such as research
44 (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Plano Clark and Creswell, 2008; Creswell and
45 Plano Clark, 2011). Yet, some critics of theory synthesis argue that it is not a
46 straightforward exercise, but one that can lead to the selection of what is felt to
47 be more comfortable with when evidence might suggest otherwise (Thyer,
48 2008; Payne, 2021). Proponents for theory synthesis have admonished against
49 being drawn into the paradigm wars, preferring to focus on the potential for
50 theory development potential and practice implications across various
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3 disciplines (Hellmann, 2003; Pound and Campbell, 2013; Sibeon, 2004; Turner,
4 1985).

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8 In social work, theory synthesis was attempted in the seventies (Goldstein,
9 1973; Payne, 2021; Pincus and Minahan, 1973). During that time, Pincus and
10 Minahan (1973) argued that the strength of the social work profession lies in
11 recognising and working with the connections between elements of different
12 models, while recently, Payne (2021) questioned the merits of combining
13 models of practice without an integrated theory.
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19 Therefore, it is not surprising that the potential clarity at theoretical, conceptual,
20 and practice levels that theory synthesis presents for merging Contextual
21 Safeguarding with other theoretical models and approaches is already
22 emerging. For instance, in their briefing exploring the relationship between
23 Contextual Safeguarding and the Social Model, Featherstone et al. (2018)
24 concluded that there were potential benefits in merging the two. Underscoring
25 the call for adopting a Social model, the briefing questioned the 'view that the
26 greatest threats to children's safety and wellbeing are posed by their parents or
27 carers' intentional negligence or abuse' (p.7). Similarly, in another briefing,
28 Owens et al. (2020) compared relationship-based social work with Contextual
29 Safeguarding, while Firmin et al. (2021) compared the Signs of Safety approach
30 with Contextual Safeguarding. However, there is a dearth of studies that have
31 gone beyond such binary comparisons leaving a significant knowledge gap that
32 prompts the purpose of this paper.
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44 **Purpose**

45 The purpose of this paper:

- 46 (i) To identify areas of convergence and divergence between the
47 Contextual Safeguarding approach with existing theoretical models
48 and approaches that inform safeguarding children practice.
- 49 (ii) To demonstrate how Contextual Safeguarding approach can be
50 synthesised with existing theoretical models and approaches to
51 provide conceptual clarity.
- 52 (iii) To provide a methodological basis for synthesising different but
53 complementary theoretical models and frameworks in social work.
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Design

This conceptual paper draws on the theory synthesis approach developed by Turner, (1985) and adopted by Pound and Campbell, (2015) which consists of three stages namely:

- (i) Stage 1: Synthesis preparation,
- (ii) Stage 2: Synthesis
- (iii) Stage 3. Synthesis refinement

The paper also draws on a case vignette below to illustrate how the Contextual Safeguarding approach can be combined with complementary theoretical models and approaches:

A Case Vignette:

Various elements of a case vignette are woven seamlessly throughout this paper to ensure clarity about the practice implications for merging complementary theoretical models and approaches. Hughes and Huby (2002, p.383) argue that there is consensus across the literature that the chief purpose of vignettes is 'to provide entry points to what can be complex research questions as they selectively stimulate elements of the research topic under study'. Likewise, Kandemir and Budd, (2018, p.1) concur that case vignettes can be a 'helpful tool for framing complex or sensitive topics'. The case vignette described below is therefore used in this paper as an aid to simplify and illustrate the theory synthesis and its application to practice:

A teenage boy aged 13 is reported missing from home to the Police. The school is concerned about his attendance and behaviour. It turns out he has gone missing without being reported on a few previous occasions but always returned after one or two nights away. The boy has a difficult relationship with his single mother who struggles with setting boundaries for him. The family is entirely dependent on benefits. On this occasion, the boy is finally located at a train station - some 200 miles away from his hometown, with two other young people who have been excluded from school. The boys are also known to Social Care and the Police for

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3 *using drugs and committing petty crimes locally. A large quantity of cash,*
4 *heroin, and three temporary mobile phones are seized by the police.*
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8 **(i) Stage 1: Synthesis preparation:**
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10 The synthesis preparation involves extracting and summarising parts of
11 relevant theories that have been identified (Pound and Campbell, 2013; Turner,
12 1985; 1991). Extraction involves drawing out those parts of the theories that
13 you are concerned with such as their key propositions, focus, domain, values,
14 and principles (Pound and Campbell, 2013). Theoretical models and
15 approaches synthesised with Contextual Safeguarding in this paper were
16 purposively chosen because although, not an exhaustive list, they are some of
17 the commonly used theoretical models and approaches used in safeguarding
18 children in the UK (see below):
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- 26 • Ecological Systems theory
 - 27 • Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model
 - 28 • Family Safeguarding model
 - 29 • Social model
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36 As with sampling in qualitative research, a purposive sampling strategy was
37 adopted in this instance. Purposive sampling has been described by Bryman
38 (2012) as a sampling procedure of choice in qualitative research; providing the
39 best opportunity for choosing a sample that is likely to yield useful findings for
40 the researcher. However, purposive sampling can be seen as judgemental
41 sampling because of the role played by the researcher (Whittaker, 2009). A
42 synopsis of the purposively selected theoretical models and approaches is
43 provided below.
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51 **Ecological Systems Theory**

52 The origins of systems thinking in social work can be traced back to the general
53 systems theory of von Bertalanffy (1967 cited in Payne, 2021). However,
54 current social work practice mainly draws on Ecological systems theory which
55 accentuates the quality and context of the environment in which the child
56 develops and the interactions between various subsystems that constitute the
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3 environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The subsystems include the microsystem,
4 mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, impacting on child
5 wellbeing and development. The chronosystem relates to the temporal aspects
6 and mirrors the lifespan approach by Chisnell and Kelly (2019). Bernstein and
7 Gray (1997) described how the Ecological systems theory could effectively
8 illustrate the system-wide interrelationships among the family (microsystem),
9 neighbourhoods, school, and social life, including online networks
10 (mesosystem), and the community and the broader society with its socio-
11 cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices which constrain actions
12 (macrosystem). Siporin (1980) describes the Ecological systems theory in
13 social work as representing a conceptual system that includes a person in a
14 transactional relationship with their physical, social, and cultural environment to
15 achieve some degree of equilibrium and balance. The Ecological systems
16 theory involves interactions among people in groups, families, and societies in
17 their life situations, resulting in either well-functioning or dysfunctional
18 behaviour patterns.
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32 Ecological systems thinking, and particularly, the notion of dialectical exchange
33 among various domains underpins assessment approaches such as the
34 "Framework for the Assessment for the Children in Need and their Families"
35 (Department of Health, 2000), which systemically links three key domains,
36 namely, child development needs, parenting capacity, and wider family and
37 environmental factors. Each of these domains affects and contributes to
38 understanding the child and their family (Department of Health, 2000; Horwath,
39 2002). In application to the case vignette, this approach would require one to
40 explore the system-wide transactional interrelationships between the young
41 person, his family, physical and online network of friends, and school. The wider
42 neighbourhood community and the broader society with its socio-cultural
43 institutions, beliefs, and practices which constrain or spur on the behaviours
44 and actions of the young person would also need to be understood as part of
45 the wider environmental context. The Ecological systems theory has an
46 overarching holistic role in safeguarding practice because of its ability to
47 simplify the complex interplay between the various subsystems of a social
48 system, hence, it informs the dominant Framework for existing safeguarding
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3 practice (Department for Education; Department of Health, 2000; Horwath,
4 2002).
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7 **Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model**

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9 The Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model, is a family-focused model
10 for working across adult mental health and children's services (Diggins, 2011;
11 Falkov, 1998; 2012; Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE), 2009). Falkov
12 (2012) describes the model family systems model because it draws on the
13 ecological model. The model illustrates the close link between the child's and
14 adult members' mental health and wellbeing in a family where a parent is
15 mentally ill. According to this model, an adult's or parent's mental health needs
16 affect the parenting and family relationships influencing the child's mental
17 health and development (Diggins, 2011; Falkov, 2012; Social Care Institute of
18 Excellence (SCIE), 2009). In turn, the child's mental health and development
19 needs affect the adult or parents, affecting parenting and family relationships.
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29 A central tenet of the model is the belief that parental mental health has a critical
30 and enduring influence on the whole family and is, therefore, relevant to
31 intrafamilial and extrafamilial safeguarding issues. This family-focused model
32 assesses both the risks and stressors that affect the child and focuses on the
33 protective factors, such as resilience and resource factors that inform their
34 interaction with children or adult services, their cultural needs, and other factors
35 within the community environment (Falkov, 2017). For example, the adverse
36 impact of the behaviour of the young person in the case vignette could
37 potentially aggravate his lone mother's mental health and wellbeing as well as
38 his own; thus, rendering the whole family in need of support and services.
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48 **Family Safeguarding Model**

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50 Developed by Hertfordshire County Council in 2015, the Family Safeguarding
51 model aims to improve children and their families to make the desirable
52 changes (Forrester et al., 2017). The model, which is based on a behaviourist
53 conception of human development, uses motivational interviewing to help
54 families overcome their ambivalent behaviour through reflecting on their current
55 behaviour and comparing it with desirable future behavioural outcomes (Miller
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3 and Rollnick, 2012). This whole system model involves a partnership between
4 families, social workers, police, health (including mental health), probation, and
5 substance misuse services (Forrester et al., 2017; 2018; Miller and Rollnick,
6 2012). The model also centrally locates an adult social worker within the child
7 safeguarding team.
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12 Applied to the case vignette, the Family Safeguarding model could help support
13 the lone parent's motivation and capacity to set appropriate boundaries and
14 guidance, whilst the child is supported to address concerns around potential
15 drug misuse and criminality through the support of the other specialists within
16 the team. In short, the Family Safeguarding model is a whole family-focused
17 model with a focus on safeguarding by improving outcomes through
18 behavioural changes in children and their parents or caregivers.
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26 Social model

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28 As indicated above, the adoption of the Social model in social work draws on a
29 framework applied in disability and mental health (Featherstone et al, 2018;
30 Featherstone and Gupta, 2018; Stalker; 2015). Featherstone et al, (2018),
31 argue that 'what is defined as child abuse is socially constructed and historically
32 changing' (p.14). By challenging the 'view that the greatest threats to children's
33 safety and wellbeing are posed by their parents or carers' intentional negligence
34 or abuse' as previously cited above, Featherstone et al, (2018, p.7) argued, the
35 Social model directs attention from the intrafamilial sphere to the extrafamilial
36 contexts of harm.
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45 The fundamental proposition of the Social model is that the broader structural
46 issues are barriers to ensuring children are cared for safely and their relational
47 needs and identities respected. Unequal social structures and institutions are
48 known to cause poverty and social exclusion (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Recently,
49 evidence linking poverty, child abuse, and neglect (Bywaters et al., 2016) and
50 links between child mortality and social deprivation (National Child Mortality
51 Database (NCMD), 2021) have been established.
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3 The critical elements of the Social model include promoting children and
4 families' hopes and aspirations, human rights and advocacy, positive social
5 connections, and mitigating the broader social, political, economic, and cultural
6 barriers (Featherstone et al., 2020). Levitas (2000) argued that multiple
7 deprivation and barriers to inclusion emanate from structural inequalities such
8 as low incomes, limited educational and employment opportunities, and various
9 forms of social and economic discrimination in their redistributive discourse.
10 Hence, Holman (1988) proposed community efforts to mitigate family poverty
11 and some social disadvantage.
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20 Understanding the extent of structural causes of poverty, social exclusion,
21 inequalities, and various indices of multiple deprivations for families living in
22 certain cold spots is therefore critical for the Social model (Alcock, 2006; Social
23 Mobility Commission, 2017). When supporting families and protecting children,
24 the Social model specifically draws attention to the economic, social, political,
25 and cultural barriers that adversely impact children's safe care, relationships,
26 and identities (Featherstone et al, 2018; Featherstone and Gupta, 2018;
27 Featherstone et al, 2020). Regarding the case vignette, consideration would be
28 given to the structural economic, social, political, and cultural barriers that
29 adversely impact his care, family and peer relationships, and his identity needs.
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38 (ii) Stage 2: Synthesis

39 Following the synthesis preparation, the actual synthesis involved
40 systematically comparing the selected theoretical models and approaches for
41 points of convergence and divergence and ensuring conceptual clarity. Drawing
42 from Pound and Campbell (2015) and Turner (1991), criteria based on each
43 theoretical model or approach's proposition, the main conceptual focus, the
44 essential domain, and principles or values were developed for the synthesis.
45 Pound and Campbell (2015) describe the process of undertaking a synthesis
46 as involving a careful and systematic step-by-step 'immersion' in the theories.
47 The process is likened to qualitative analysis, although they acknowledge that
48 theories and models are broader in scope, less detailed, and more abstract
49 than qualitative findings (Pound and Campbell, 2015). Thus, this paper satisfies
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the vital quality criteria of conceptual paper as outlined in the outline of the design above.

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Table 1: Abstracts comparing selected theories and models for convergence and divergence

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(iii) Stage 3: Synthesis refinement

Synthesis refinement strikingly, resembles the final stages of qualitative synthesis in which the aim is to generate a novel interpretation or conceptual advancement (Campbell et al., 2011; Pound et al., 2005; Pound and Campbell, 2015). In this instance, synthesis refinement involves interrogating the synthesis for new conceptual insights using straight-forward criteria comprising proposition, focus, critical domain, and principles or values for each theoretical model and approach. The abstracts for each of the selected theories and models in Table 1, were compared with Contextual Safeguarding for synthesis by extracting and clarifying what each one of them proposes, as well as what its focus, domain, and principles or values are. Below is the integrated discussion and analysis of the findings and their practice implications for this synthesis.

Findings, discussion, and practice implications

From this synthesis, and drawing on the case vignette, it can be discerned that within the different theoretical models and approaches, there are areas of convergence, divergence, and overlaps. For instance, a common thread in all the theoretical propositions (see Table 1 above) is that the interplay between various factors in intrafamilial and extrafamilial environments influence a child's risk. However, there are varying degrees of emphasis. The Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model proposes that there is a complex systemic interplay between mental ill-health in parents, the development and mental health of their children, and the relationships within family units affected by mental ill-health (Diggins, 2011; Falkov, 2009; 2012; 2017; SCIE, 2009). In much the same way, the Family Safeguarding model proposes that parents are adversely impacted by their ambivalence which makes it difficult to manage their children's emotional and behavioural challenges (Forrester et al, 2017; 2018; Miller and Rollnick, 2012).

Similarly, the Contextual Safeguarding spotlights the child's exposure to the extrafamilial risk, leading to significant harm to children. In the case vignette, for example, while there is evidence of extrafamilial peer pressure, there is also evidence of poverty and issues with maintaining boundaries by the boy's

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3 mother. The boy's risk of harm occurs in the social field, consisting of friends
4 who follow similar rules about non-school attendance, travelling to far places
5 without parental supervision, engaging in criminal behaviour, among other
6 behaviours. The rules in their social field act as pull factors for the teenage boy
7 that enable him to achieve his status and acceptance in the habitus. That is
8 compounded by the family's experiences poverty and a mother who is unable
9 to impose parental boundaries. Although the Contextual Safeguarding
10 approach accentuates the point that parents and caregivers have no control
11 over extrafamilial risk and harm, it still acknowledges the vital role parents play
12 in managing intrafamilial harm with their children (Firmin, 2017; 2020).
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21 Likewise, the Ecological systems theory, when adopted with the family of the
22 boy in the case vignette, would require the exploration of the whole family's
23 transactional relationship with, and how it's impacted by, the various levels of
24 their physical, social, and cultural environments (Bernstein and Gray, 1997;
25 Siporin (1980). Similarly, from the perspective of the Social model, it would be
26 acknowledged that the structural environment poses barriers to the boy's safe
27 care (Bywaters, 2016; Featherstone et al., 2020). Therefore, when merging the
28 Contextual Safeguarding approach with the Ecological systems theory in the
29 case of the boy in the vignette for this paper, one would need to understand the
30 systemic interaction of the immediate (microsystems), intermediate
31 (mesosystems), and wider ecological environments (macro/exosystems) that
32 provide the social rules, capital, and status for this boy. Similarly, competence
33 in the knowledge of the Social Model would be complementary in providing a
34 helpful framework for understanding the socio-economic structural implications
35 for the level of poverty of the boy's family and how to intervene in this case.
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48 In refining the synthesis further, at the focus level (see Table 1 above), for each
49 theoretical model and approach, other areas of convergence and
50 complementarity and lack of exclusive focus become more apparent. For
51 instance, the Family Safeguarding model and the Think Child, Think Parent,
52 Think Family model seem to focus, but not exclusively, on intrafamilial needs
53 or harm. Likewise, when applying the Contextual Safeguarding approach to the
54 boy in the case vignette, one can draw on the knowledge from the Think Child,
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3 Think Parent, Think Family model, focusing mainly on the impact his behaviour
4 is having on his single mother's and his mental health and well-being, as well
5 as their ambivalent relationship. Equally, therefore, there would be implications
6 on how one could go about employing aspects of the Family Safeguarding
7 model. For example, motivational interviewing could be used to explore the boy
8 and his mother's ambivalent relationship.
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14 While there seems to be evidence of overlapping propositions and areas of
15 convergence, hence complementarity in the sample of theoretical models and
16 approaches considered in this paper, there are, however some subtle areas of
17 divergence (as illustrated in Table 1 above). For example, despite the positive
18 evaluation of the Family Safeguarding model, involving four Local Authorities
19 (Forrester, et al, 2017), one potential divergence is that motivational
20 interviewing adopts a behaviourist conception of human development which
21 focuses on parental failings. Yet, in contrast, the Contextual Safeguarding
22 approach and the Social model are focused more on extrafamilial harm and not
23 mainly on intrafamilial harm and family deficiencies.
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33 On the other hand, the Ecological systems theory, when adopted in social work,
34 focuses on the whole system-wide interactions; the three domains consisting
35 of the development of the child or young person; parents and carers; and family
36 and environment. That systemic interplay is aptly illustrated through the
37 Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department for Health,
38 2000; 2012; HM Government, 2018; Diggins, 2011; Horwath, 2002). However,
39 when integrating practice these subtle differences in the theoretical models and
40 approaches would account for their individual emphases rather than any
41 dissonance.
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50 The proposition by each of these theoretical models and approaches seems to
51 be in their focus and emphasis, yet, in practice, they embrace much more. For
52 example, while Contextual Safeguarding targets extrafamilial harm, it still
53 recognises the importance of collaborative partnership between working
54 parents and other professionals (Firmin, 2017; 2020; Firmin and Knowles,
55 2020). Contextual Safeguarding with the boy in the case vignette, therefore,
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3 there would be a role for partnership working with him and his mother as well
4 as with other multidisciplinary professionals.
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8 Notwithstanding the common criticism that existing safeguarding practice
9 entirely focuses on preventing abuse within the home environment that
10 emanates from parenting capacity limitations (Firmin, 2017; 2020), Contextual
11 Safeguarding recognises the key role of the family within the wider context. In
12 the same vein, by focusing on the economic, social, and cultural barriers that
13 adversely impact the safe care of children, the Social model still promotes
14 children and families' hopes and aspirations, human rights and advocacy, and
15 positive social connections (Featherstone and Gupta, 2018). Thus, under the
16 criterion of focus (as illustrated in Table 1 above), the thread that is woven
17 through all theoretical models and approaches in the sample, is their
18 convergence, complementarity, and lack of exclusive focus, on either,
19 interfamilial or extrafamilial issues of concern as exemplified with the boy in the
20 case vignette above.
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32 Regarding the domain criterion (see Table 1 above), what seems to be the
33 central area of convergence is the interface between the child, family, and the
34 multi-level structural environment. This interface is more apparent in the Social
35 model, Contextual Safeguarding, and Ecological systems, which emphasise
36 extrafamilial concerns. Yet, the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model
37 also identifies risks, stressors, and protective factors interacting with services,
38 culture, and the community environment as its domain. Similarly, the Family
39 Safeguarding model also characterises itself as being ecological and being
40 evidence-based, collaborative, as well as rights and strengths-based. What this
41 suggests, as with its propositions and focus, is that there is convergence,
42 complementarity, and no exclusive domains for each of the models and
43 approaches (as illustrated in Table 1 above).
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54 Similarly, enabling the child and family's capacity and strengths and human
55 rights principles and values (see Table 1 above) is a common thread in the
56 Social model, Contextual Safeguarding and Family Safeguarding model, and
57 the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family models. The Ecological systems
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3 theory ultimately provides insights into how all subsystems and actions are
4 interconnected. Likewise, someone working with the boy in the case vignette
5 would be able to find a lot of synergies in the values of these theoretical models.
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9 In the same vein, when applying Contextual Safeguarding to the same case,
10 one would be guided by principles of being collaborative, ecological, rights-
11 based, strengths-based, and evidence-informed practice, while also using their
12 practice knowledge and understanding of the principles of interactive and
13 transactional systems and subsystems of the Ecological systems theory. Yet,
14 when addressing the teenage boy's mother's motivation and ambivalent
15 relationship with him using the Family Safeguarding model, one would need to
16 explore the young person and mother's mental health and well-being by
17 drawing from the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model. Amidst all this,
18 the family-focused Social Model would ensure that the young person and her
19 mother's hopes, aspirations, and human rights are advocated for and positive
20 social connections within the broader social, political, economic, and cultural
21 barriers are enhanced.
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33 The synthesis refinement of the sample of theoretical models and approaches
34 considered in this paper is illustrated in Figure 1 below:
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57 **Figure 1: An illustration of the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with**
58 **existing theoretical models and approaches to safeguarding children**
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3 The diagrammatic illustration of the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with
4 existing theoretical models and approaches to safeguarding children in Figure
5 1 above is intended to provide clarity on areas of overlapping convergence,
6 divergence, and emphases for each of these. For example, when working with
7 the boy in the case vignette, the emphasis would be, but not exclusively, on the
8 Family Safeguarding and Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family models for
9 the interfamilial issues. Similarly, at the extrafamilial level, Contextual
10 Safeguarding and Social model would be preferred, albeit, not exclusively,
11 while the whole system-wide interaction between the various subsystems
12 would be better understood from the overarching Ecological systems
13 perspective. Figure 1 illustrates how these can be used in a systematic and
14 eclectic manner. That is made possible because of the explicit and implicit
15 overlapping commonalities and complementarity as well as levels of emphasis
16 at the proposition, focus, domain, and values and principles levels among child
17 safeguarding theoretical models and approaches.

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30 Having a much broader suite of tools to work with should enable a more holistic
31 approach to safeguarding practice. Rather than supplant the existing theoretical
32 models and approaches, this paper has sought to demonstrate that Contextual
33 Safeguarding and the theoretical models and approaches in the sample,
34 complement each other in many ways. However, that may have implications
35 beyond other theoretical models and approaches considered in this sample.

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41 While this paper has attempted to satisfy the critical quality criteria for a
42 conceptual article, it is important to note that theory synthesis does not always
43 lead to compatibility and successful integration of theoretical models and
44 approaches. For example, Moller (2013) argues that some incompatible
45 theoretical assumptions cannot be integrated. Likewise, Payne (2021) cautions
46 that in some instances, theoretical eclecticism from elsewhere might not
47 transfer fully to the different contexts of social work. Other critics of theory
48 synthesis also argue that merging different theoretical models and approaches
49 could lead to practitioners selectively cherry-picking what they feel more
50 comfortable with, even when evidence might suggest otherwise (Payne, 2021;
51 Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). Payne (2021) also points out that there is
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3 another potential problem with theory synthesis in that practitioners without the
4 relevant knowledge and understanding might use theoretical models or
5 approaches in an inconsistent manner that devalues them because of
6 superficial and lack of in-depth synthesis.
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11 **For the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with other commonly used child**
12 **safeguarding theoretical models and approaches to be robust,** it, therefore,
13 requires broader and deeper knowledge, skills, and understanding. Theory
14 synthesis provides a confluence of perspectives that hold promise for the
15 development of a more eclectic and holistic approach to applying theory to
16 safeguarding practice. **Synthesising Contextual Safeguarding with other**
17 **commonly used child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches has**
18 **implications far beyond those considered in this paper.**
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27 **Conclusion**

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30 **The theory synthesis discussed in this paper demonstrates how**
31 **complementary theoretical models and approaches can be merged; thus,**
32 **broadening the knowledge base about the whole system-wide safeguarding**
33 **practice in the UK. More specifically, the arguments presented in this**
34 **conceptual paper demonstrate how the Contextual Safeguarding approach can**
35 **be merged with other complementary theoretical models and approaches, such**
36 **as Ecological systems theory, Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model,**
37 **Family Safeguarding model, and the Social Model theory synthesis. Using a**
38 **case vignette, this synthesis also illustrates how to, and when to apply different**
39 **but complementary theoretical models and approaches to practice. It has been**
40 **particularly highlighted how practitioners may draw on specific theory**
41 **depending on whether the context is primarily extrafamilial issues or**
42 **intrafamilial concerns.**
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54 **This paper locates the experiences of the young person, such as the boy in the**
55 **case vignette, firmly within the family, neighbourhood, and the broader**
56 **community of society's socio-economic-cultural environment they live in.**
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58 However, the multiple challenges that children and their families face can be
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3 far too complex; requiring more lenses to mitigate them effectively. Hence, this
4 paper aims to inform safeguarding children practice through demonstrating how
5 complementary aspects of the other theoretical models and approaches can be
6 carefully combined with Contextual Safeguarding.
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11 **Synthesising Contextual Safeguarding** also contributes to the knowledge base,
12 especially, the methodological considerations for integrating theoretical models
13 and approaches, but more work is required. In the same vein, the paper
14 explores philosophical issues for a theory synthesis design; arguing that the
15 pragmatism involved in merging disparate theories within the same purview
16 benefits from their combined complementary strengths while minimising their
17 unique weaknesses and limitations. However, practical implications and not
18 necessarily philosophical considerations influenced the design adopted for the
19 paper.
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28 Finally, the arguments presented in this paper also supports the view that one
29 theoretical model or approach is not enough to provide solutions to
30 safeguarding children and supporting families. Neither is it a binary issue
31 requiring only a combination of Contextual Safeguarding and just another
32 model, which at the outset was highlighted as the most common approach.
33 Rather, what is needed is a systematically, synthesised combination of
34 complementary aspects of different theoretical models or approaches, as this
35 paper has argued. Therefore, based on the key arguments presented in this
36 conceptual paper and the evidence of overlapping and complementary
37 propositions, focus, domains, and principles and values, these new conceptual
38 insights have important implications for improving system-wide safeguarding
39 practice in the UK and further research.
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Table 1: Abstracts comparing selected theories and models for convergence and divergence

Criteria for comparing selected theories for convergence and divergence	Contextual Safeguarding approach	Ecological Systems theory	Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model	Family Safeguarding model	Social Model
Proposition	A child or young person's experiences of interaction with the extrafamilial environment can expose them to the risk of significant harm that parents and caregivers have no control over. Hence, extrafamilial environmental contexts.	A person is in a transactional relationship with their physical, social, and cultural environment to achieve some degree of equilibrium and balance.	There is a complex systemic interplay among mental ill-health in parents, their children's development and mental health, and the relationships within family units affected by mental ill-health. Key concerns are risks and stressors or protective, resilience, or resource factors interacting with children or adult services, culture, and other issues within the community environment.	The obstacle to behaviour changes in children and their parents or caregivers is ambivalence. Motivational interviewing is required to help people explore and resolve their ambivalence by managing conversations to help them introspect and reconsider their fundamental values and compare them with their current behaviour.	The broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts are barriers to ensuring children are cared for safely and their relational needs and identities respected.
Focus	Keeping children safe within the extrafamilial contexts	When adopted in social work, the focus is on whole system-wide changes to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.	Considers the child, the parent, and the family when assessing the needs of and providing support for families with a parent suffering from a mental health problem.	Keeping children safe from risk by improving outcomes through behaviour changes in children and their parents or caregivers	The focus of the Social model is on the economic, social, and cultural barriers that adversely impact the children's safe care and meeting their relational needs and identities
Domains	Contextual safeguarding system consisting of target, legislative Framework, partnerships, outcomes measurement. (Focused on extrafamilial harm but also promotes partnership working with parents)	Whole ecological system-wide (her family (micro-level), her school and social life (mezzo-level), and her community and the socio-cultural beliefs and practices which constrain actions (macro-level).	The systemic interplay among child's development, the parent's mental health, parenting capacity, and the family relationships.	Children and their parents or caregivers. It is evidence-based, collaborative, rights-based, strengths-based, and ecological.	Structural causes to safeguarding concerns such as poverty, social exclusion, inequalities as well as lack of or inadequate social protection
Principles or values	Collaborative, ecological, rights-based, strengths-based, and evidence-informed practice	Component or parts of a system within the context of the transactional relationships between systems and subsystems	The family plays a central role in a child's life while concerns such as parental mental health or child protection issues have a critical and enduring influence on the whole family	Root causes of many children's issues and outcomes are linked to parental issues such as their ambivalent behaviour	Promotes children and families' hopes and aspirations, human rights and advocacy, positive social connections within the broader social, political, economic, and cultural barriers.

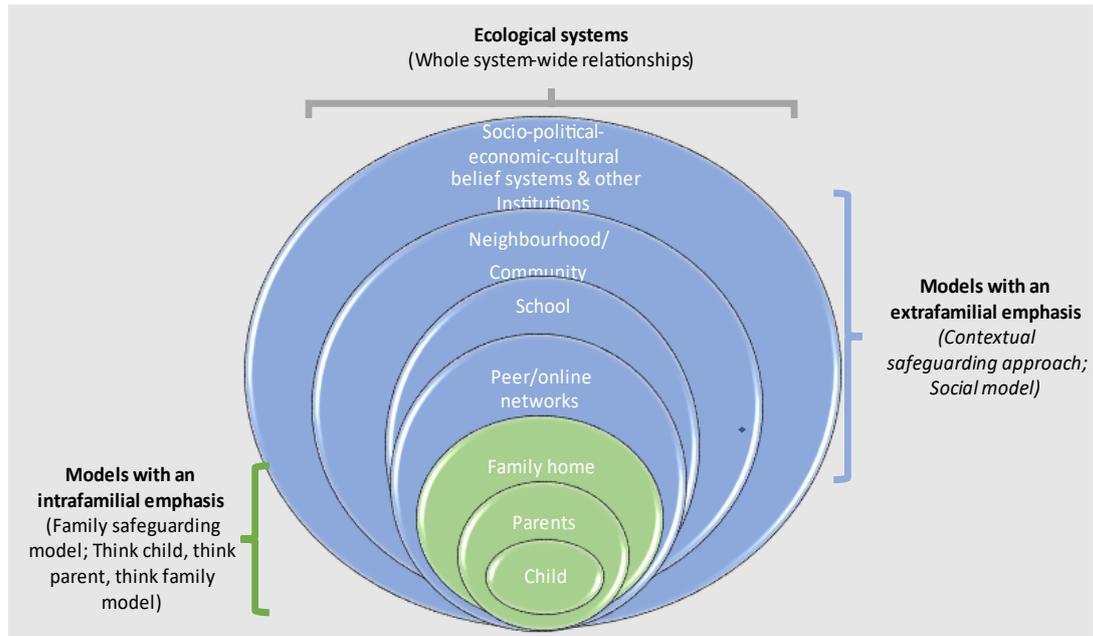


Figure 1: An illustration of the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with existing theoretical models and approaches to safeguarding children