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Context matters: Conceptualising and operationalising the contextual prevention of child sexual abuse

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Abstract

There is growing recognition of the contextual dynamics of child sexual abuse, with a developing evidence base supporting it, sparking calls to ensure prevention efforts are contextualised. Contextual approaches extend the focus of prevention beyond the individual, to include immediate situations, and the physical and social contexts in which abuse occurs. Although academic and industry support for contextual approaches is gaining momentum, there is no consistent definition of contextual prevention nor operational clarity currently available to inform research, policy and practice. This contributes to a lack of policy guidance and practice consistency; also impeding much needed evaluation research, and likely slowing scholarly and practice uptake. In this article, we address this important gap. Based on a critical review of relevant literature, we propose a conceptual definition of contextual prevention and its operationalisation and provide a framework and guidance for policymakers and practitioners tasked with protecting children from child sexual abuse.

KEYWORDS

child sexual abuse, contextual prevention, environmental, safeguarding, situational

Key Practitioner Messages

- A comprehensive approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse requires both individually and contextually focused prevention strategies.
- Contextual prevention is an umbrella term comprising prevention efforts that target factors external to the individual (potential victim or perpetrator), to create safer environments for children.
- Contextual prevention strategies include addressing social determinants of abuse, enhancing formal regulatory controls, crime prevention through environmental design and situational crime prevention.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a serious global public health concern. The United Nations Children's Fund reports 1 in 20 girls (aged 15–19 years) have experienced forced sex in their lifetime (UNICEF, 2020). Recent Australian research

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found 37.3 per cent of women and 18.8 per cent of men reported having experienced CSA (Mathews et al., 2023). The negative consequences of abuse traverse physical, psychological and psychosocial effects (Nagtegaal & Boonmann, 2022) and are associated with considerable economic burden (Letourneau et al., 2018). This highlights a critical need for effective prevention strategies for CSA.

Individual, ecological and situational factors, and their collective interplay, best explain the perpetration of CSA (e.g. Clayton et al., 2018; Smallbone et al., 2008; Smallbone & Cale, 2015; Ward & Beech, 2016). Despite this, traditional CSA prevention efforts have largely focused on individuals: either perpetrators or (potential) victims. Most attention is given to the statutory identification, punishment and treatment of individuals who offend (Austin & Salter, 2023; Finkelhor, 2009; Quadara et al., 2015), also extending to individuals who have perpetrated abuse but are unknown to authorities (Beier et al., 2015), and to those identified as at risk of CSA perpetration (Van Horn et al., 2015). Child-focused protective behaviour programmes, which teach children to recognise risks, engage in some form of resistance, and report concerns or abuse, are also among the most implemented CSA prevention initiatives across the globe (Russell et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2015). These dominant traditional approaches form important components of a comprehensive prevention agenda; however, they have been criticised for their exclusive focus on the people involved and failure to address the broad and complex interplay of contextual factors that also contribute to CSA (Smallbone & McKillop, 2016; Letourneau et al., 2014).

The influence of contextual factors on human behaviour has long been acknowledged. Dating back to the 1960s, research within social psychology revealed the power of situations to influence human behaviour (Mischel, 1968), including the capacity of 'normal' people to engage in 'abnormal' behaviour under certain circumstances (e.g. Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 2007). From an ecological perspective, community psychology focuses on community history, values and beliefs, resources, challenges and opportunities to better understand behaviour and to intervene at this systemic level to improve conditions and outcomes (Trickett, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1979) extended the ecological focus to human development. He contended that human behaviour is influenced by successive ecological systems in which an individual is socially embedded, including family, peer, school, neighbourhood and sociocultural systems. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model has been further applied to the aetiology of child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981), acknowledging environmental, individual, family, community, and cultural systems and their collective interplay in the development and impacts of child abuse including CSA. Environmental criminology extends this focus to criminal behaviour – explaining the impact of environmental conditions on crime commission, why some environments present more risks for crime than others, and that changing criminogenic aspects of environments can change criminal behaviour, including CSA (Wortley & Mazerolle, 2008). This widens the scope of investigation to allow for a micro-situational analysis of behaviour (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006).

Given the importance of ecology and environment, calls have been made to contextualise CSA prevention (e.g. Firmin & Rayment-McHugh, 2020; Lloyd, 2022; McKillop et al., 2018; Quadara et al., 2015; Smallbone et al., 2013a). Contextual prevention draws attention to risks for CSA that are external to the individual perpetrator or abuse victim, shifting attention to the broader contexts in which CSA occurs.

However, a contextual approach to prevention is still a relatively new addition to the CSA prevention landscape. The slow uptake – in scholarship and practice – is perhaps to be expected, as shifting from a largely individual prevention agenda to one focused on context requires a transformation in the 'what' and 'how' of prevention practice (Firmin & Rayment-McHugh, 2020). Adoption of contextual approaches to prevention may also be hindered by the absence of a clear definition and lack of consensus about the scope of contextual prevention. Until now, a range of terms have been used. Wortley and Smallbone (2006), Kaufman et al. (2010) and Morley and Higgins (2018) applied situational crime prevention to CSA, including creating safer environments for children and youth. Rayment-McHugh et al. (2015a) and Smallbone and McKillop (2016) promoted place-based prevention, focused on abuse settings, including small communities. Firmin's (2017) contextual safeguarding approach targets the extra-familial contexts of harm including public spaces, schools and transport hubs. Despite nuanced distinctions between these constructs, all reflect prevention focus and targets external to the individual and showcase the potential breadth of 'contextual prevention'. Their inconsistent use, however, may foster confusion about what constitutes a contextual approach to prevention. This need for greater conceptual and operational clarity to guide future prevention policy and practice was the impetus for this paper.

AIM AND METHOD

The aim of this paper is to conceptualise and operationalise practice developments in contextual prevention of CSA, addressing a key knowledge and practice gap. A critical review of the literature (as defined by Grant & Booth, 2009) was used to provide an evidence-informed platform from which to formulate a conceptual and operational framework for contextual prevention.

Given the interdisciplinary focus of the paper, a critical review was deemed the most suitable method for collating and analysing literature spanning multiple disciplines (Grant & Booth, 2009). Targeted searches were adopted to identify relevant literature. This included published conceptual and empirical works spanning social, community, and developmental psychology and environmental criminology disciplines. Seminal works were initially prioritised, alongside known literature (and cited materials). Additional academic literature was also scanned using search terms ‘contextual prevention’, ‘contextual safeguarding’ and ‘situational prevention’. Literature was then analysed and synthesised to identify and evaluate key lessons for advancing contextual prevention of CSA.

The analysis first considers contextual influences on CSA. The conceptualisation and operational scope of contextual prevention are then explored. This includes identification of the aims, theory of change, targets of contextual prevention, steps to operationalise a contextual approach and key contextual prevention strategies that attend to contextual risks. Exemplar contextual prevention initiatives are also reviewed, promoting a comprehensive approach to operationalising contextual prevention. It is hoped this examination enhances conceptual clarity and guides operationalisation, as part of a comprehensive prevention agenda that ultimately attends to both the individual and contextual factors related to CSA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding contextual influences on CSA

‘Context’ is an encompassing term used to describe the diverse environments in which people are embedded and CSA occurs. The contextual environment has been conceptualised as a series of systems that span macro- and micro-levels, and across a continuum spanning distal to proximal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Krug et al., 2002). By integrating this ecological conceptualisation with criminology’s situational conceptualisation of CSA (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006), contextual prevention extends the micro-level lens beyond the individual, to include the immediate situations in which sexual abuse occurs. Thus, at the macro level, neighbourhood and community systems set the social conditions that impact development and behaviour; whereas at the micro level, individuals interact with the immediate social and physical environments in which behaviour is actioned. Researchers have argued that proximal factors (micro-level factors) are more influential than distal (macro-level factors) over people’s behaviour (Smallbone & Cale, 2016).

At a macro level, sociocultural context impacts people’s behaviour – including risk of experiencing or perpetrating CSA – through social norms and values, legal and protective systems and resources, and the stressors and challenges experienced at a population level (Rayment-McHugh, 2023). Social norms and values influence people’s actions by conveying important information about behavioural standards, including about issues relevant to CSA. This includes social norms and values regarding interpersonal relationships, the use of violence, the construction of masculinity, attitudes towards children and maltreatment, taboos about sexuality, gender roles and equality (e.g. Collin-Vezina et al., 2015; Klika et al., 2019; Krug et al., 2002). Legislation and government or organisational policies are established to set and enforce acceptable standards of behaviour, based on prevailing social norms. These provide clear consequences for breaches of acceptable behaviour, including in relation to CSA. Indeed, higher prevalence of CSA is reported in countries or regions where laws related to CSA are absent, weak or not enforced and where protective systems are ineffective (Krug et al., 2002; UNICEF, 2017). This is likely because the absence of adequate regulation has the effect of limiting external scrutiny and guidance over behaviour, tacitly implying such behaviour is acceptable or tolerated. Socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, housing stress and overcrowding, unemployment, lack of access to social support, availability of alcohol and drugs and intergenerational trauma reflect stressors and challenges often identified as social determinants of child maltreatment, including CSA (e.g. Cant et al., 2019; Doidge et al., 2017; Quadara et al., 2015; Wild & Anderson, 2007).

Evidence of an uneven distribution of CSA in time and place (Rayment-McHugh, 2023, 2020; Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015b) lends support to the important role of macro-level environmental factors in the perpetration of abuse. Indeed, concentrations of CSA are reported in some contexts and not others, including global crisis settings, remote and marginalised communities, and youth-serving organisations. However, a review of disparate case studies suggests that abuse concentrations cannot be adequately explained by the coincidental presence of highly motivated or deviant individuals. Instead, contextual factors provide a better explanation for disparate incidence rates (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015b). For example, on Pitcairn Island in the Pacific Ocean (where nearly half the male population were arrested in relation to CSA), a culture of male entitlement, ‘normalisation’ of abuse, young girls not believing they could prevent abuse, and early concerns raised about CSA being ignored, reflected social conditions that support abuse and a breakdown in the systemic controls which should have prevented the onset and persistence of this behaviour (Marks, 2008; Power, 2007).

At the micro level, social ecological theories (e.g. Belsky, 1980; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981) position the child within family (and peer) systems, highlighting the role of proximal social relationships in protecting children (or not) from CSA.

Familial risks for CSA are acknowledged (Assink et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of positive parenting skills that foster children's resilience, enhance parental guardianship and promote open family communication (Guastaferrero et al., 2019; Mendelson & Letourneau, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2018, 2022) as protective mechanisms against CSA.

From a criminological perspective, Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) focuses attention on micro-level contextual factors, positing that crime occurs when a potential offender encounters a suitable target (a vulnerable child in the case of CSA), in the absence of a capable 'guardian' (parent, carers, bystanders, etc.). This highlights the role of 'opportunity' and the important role of guardians protecting against abuse. Opportunity for unsupervised contact with a child is thus central to CSA perpetration. Highly motivated and predatory individuals can 'create' opportunity, but opportunities may arise during routine activities within a given context, such as during caregiving activities. Extending this work, Wortley (1997, 1998) suggested that situational cues (including prompts, social pressures, perceived permission and provocations) may elicit CSA offending motivations that may otherwise not have developed and that may be acted upon in the face of opportunity.

The concept of 'guardianship' refers to any person present who may notice and intervene to prevent a crime (Hollis-Peel et al., 2011). Family members, peers, staff within youth-serving institutions and community bystanders could all play a role in guarding against CSA (Russell & Higgins, 2023). However, the mere presence of a potential guardian may not be sufficient to completely deter offending (Leclerc et al., 2015). Indeed, guardianship capacity is determined by availability, a willingness to monitor, context-specific knowledge to help assess observed behaviour and taking action (Reynald, 2010). Risk of CSA is heightened when guardianship is impaired (Assink et al., 2019). Potential barriers to a person's capacity to guard against CSA within domestic settings may include the emotional bonds, trust, loyalty and dependence that are common features of familial relationships (McKillop et al., 2021). Meanwhile, an inability to detect or identify indicators of CSA, diffusion of responsibility and a lack of policy enforcement by institutions may hinder guardianship in youth-serving organisations (Lockitch et al., 2022).

Micro-level situational changes within homes and changes to family routines, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, can impact risk for CSA (Harris et al., 2021). During the pandemic, these changes appear to have increased opportunities for intrafamilial CSA and reduced opportunities to disclose abuse or for concerns to be noticed by potential guardians (Katz et al., 2022). In an analysis of abuse in the Catholic church, most priests who abused children did so more than a decade after their ordination, typically coinciding with a move to a parish residence, an associated increase in engagement with families, and less supervision from peers (Terry, 2008; Terry & Ackerman, 2008). This suggests that contextual factors – including opportunities for contact with children and situational precipitants – rather than individual factors (e.g. deviant motives) may best explain the onset of CSA behaviour.

An examination of the settings in which CSA occurs provides a further example of the micro-level environmental factors that might impact CSA perpetration and its prevention. In discussing the four different settings in which CSA occurs (domestic, public, organisational and virtual settings), Smallbone and McKillop (2016) argued that the characteristics of different settings are associated with different risk profiles for CSA, which must inform preventive efforts. For example, CSA in domestic settings typically involves perpetrators with a familial relationship to the child (father, stepfather, uncle, grandparent, brother, cousin, etc.), or someone known to the child or their parent (carer, babysitter, family friends, etc.). Such domestic settings tend to present conditions that may be conducive to abuse (e.g. unsupervised access to children and caregiving activities which bring children into close physical contact) that may precipitate offending motivations, may enable protracted grooming, and involve dependent trusting relationships which may present a barrier to active guardianship. In contrast, CSA in public settings (such as parks, playgrounds, shopping centres) is less common, but more likely to involve a stranger or non-affiliative perpetrator, and more likely to involve a single assault (rather than protracted grooming), and in the absence of emotional ties, is more likely to be reported (and therefore appear in police or court data).

Similarly, in their reviews of child safety risks in youth-serving institutional settings, Kaufman and colleagues (e.g. Higgins et al., 2016; Irenyi et al., 2006; Kaufman et al., 2016; Kaufman et al., 2019) have identified a range of micro-level environmental factors that increase risk of CSA perpetration and need to be a critical focus of prevention strategies. This includes the physical structures (e.g. doors with window panels to facilitate 'line of sight' by others) or conditions of the buildings and fixtures. It also includes less-tangible factors like the existence of child safety policies and procedures (and how visible they are in the institution – e.g. signs promoting the rights of children and ways to speak up about concerns), the training and supervision of staff, and cultural factors in how the youth-serving organisation operates (such as power differentials between adults and children – even expressed in different ways such as areas that are 'out of bounds' for children).

Virtual settings (online environment) present different opportunities for CSA including possession, production, or distribution of child sexual abuse materials (CSAMs) and the grooming of vulnerable children for abuse. Unique to this setting is the accessibility, affordability and anonymity the internet offers potential perpetrators (Cooper, 2009), increasing risks for abuse. Moreover, evolving technology continuously creates new opportunities for abuse or to avoid detection (Cullen et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2021), presenting unique challenges for prevention.

These examples highlight significant diversity in the dynamics of CSA in each setting, associated with different risk profiles and opportunity structures and highlighting a need for different prevention approaches to suit specific contexts (Smallbone & McKillop, 2016).

Conceptualising contextual prevention

Drawing on environmental criminology, social and community psychology, and ecological theories, in this review we highlight the influence of context on CSA perpetration. Contextual factors that contribute to CSA must be addressed as part of a comprehensive prevention agenda, alongside strategies addressing individual-level risk factors (Smallbone & Rayment-McHugh, 2017). Only attending to the characteristics of those people who perpetrate abuse, or the children who are harmed, limits opportunities to protect children.

Contextual prevention is an umbrella term for prevention strategies that address the macro- and micro-level structures that provide conditions conducive to CSA. Our conceptual definition is based on the premise that human behaviour – including CSA – is influenced by the context in which it occurs, that some contexts present greater risk for CSA than others and that altering contextual conditions can enhance children’s safety (see Box 1). A contextual prevention theory of change is thus based on creating safer environments for children, as the primary protective mechanism against CSA. Given CSA is perpetrated within domestic, organisational, public and virtual settings (Smallbone & McKillop, 2016), along with neighbourhoods or whole-of-community settings (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015a), contextual prevention aims to make these diverse environments safer for children.

Creating safer environments for children involves identifying and addressing contextual risk factors within a given setting (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015a). From an ecological perspective, prevention focus includes broad (macro) systemic issues such as the social determinants of abuse (social conditions and norms), or available formal regulatory controls (e.g. laws, policy, police or child protection services) (Rayment-McHugh, 2023, 2020), as well as micro-level family and peer systems. From an environmental criminology perspective, prevention focus should also include micro-level risks at a situational level (such as opportunities for abuse or barriers to active guardianship), or risks within the immediate social or physical environment (that might limit detection or enable access to vulnerable children; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Given contextual risks vary from one setting to another, specific contextual prevention targets – and the prevention strategies linked to these – are inherently context-dependent.

In contrast to a contextual focus, individually focused prevention aims to build safer individuals. Drawing on cognitive, behavioural and attachment theories, the aims of individual prevention strategies are to build protective skills for children, prevent recidivism among known offenders and address concerning sexual interests in detected or undetected offenders, or those with emerging interests (Quadara et al., 2015). This distinction between individual- and contextual-focused prevention is summarised in Table 1. When implemented together, individual and contextual prevention

BOX 1 Definition of contextual prevention

Contextual prevention of CSA comprises prevention efforts that target factors external to the individual, addressing macro- and micro-level structures, to create safer environments for children.

TABLE 1 Comparative components of individual and contextual prevention approaches to child sexual abuse (CSA).

	‘Individual’ prevention	‘Contextual’ prevention
Theory of change	Prevent CSA by creating safer individuals	Prevent CSA by creating safer environments
Underlying theory	Individual theories, e.g. cognitive theory, behavioural theory	Environmental theories, e.g. routine activities theory, social ecological theory
Prevention targets	Victims (and potential victims) Perpetrators of CSA (and those at risk of perpetrating CSA)	Neighbourhoods and communities Social and physical environments Immediate situations
Prevention strategies	Developmental prevention Punishment/deterrence Treatment programmes for victims and perpetrators Protective behaviours programmes	Address social determinants of abuse Enhance formal regulatory controls Crime prevention through environmental design Situational crime prevention

strategies comprise a comprehensive prevention agenda, consistent with integrated aetiological theories of CSA perpetration (Smallbone et al., 2008; Smallbone & Cale, 2015; Ward & Beech, 2016).

Operationalising contextual prevention

Having given our conceptual definition, the next step is to operationalise contextual prevention. We propose that 'context' itself also influences operationalisation, with different settings presenting different contextual risks, and thus demanding different contextual prevention strategies and delivery methods. For example, prevention risks and needs will differ for CSA within domestic homes, compared to sporting clubs or pastoral care settings, or the sexual trafficking of children and youth, or for combatting online CSA (Smallbone & McKillop, 2016). Contextual prevention thus must begin with some form of investigation or assessment of risks within a specified setting, to build an understanding of the factors in that setting that might contribute to abuse, and thus to inform the tailoring of prevention plans to the specified context (Morley & Higgins, 2018; Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015a; Rayment-McHugh et al., 2022). Based on this, we propose five primary steps to operationalise contextual prevention.

Select target context

The first step is to select the target context or setting. Varied contexts or settings could be the target of intervention. This could include a community location or organisation, or specific activities within these settings. For example, it could be a physical location (such as the sports changing room at the rear of the oval in the school grounds), or an activity (competing in a sports event at an 'away' venue).

Assess contextual risks in that setting

Once selected, contextual risks associated with that setting need to be assessed. Assessment of macro-level contextual risks could include social norms/values about CSA, normalisation of CSA or grooming, exposure to CSA or other forms of abuse or violence, availability of legal and protective services, effectiveness of available protective services and any barriers to their operation. Assessment might also consider any population-wide stressors impacting people within the target setting.

In contrast, assessment of micro-level contextual risks might include: the nature of CSA in that setting (e.g. who, where, when and how abuse occurs) and the conditions that precipitate offending motivations. It could also include an assessment of the setting itself (e.g. routine activities, rules/policies, opportunities for surveillance, opportunities for grooming or abuse, protective capacity and resources, and whether the physical environment contributes to risk of abuse) and of the characteristics of the children and adults within that setting (e.g. guardianship capacity/barriers to guardianship, personal vulnerabilities) (Morley & Higgins, 2018; Rayment-McHugh et al., 2022).

Match prevention strategies to risks

Once contextual risks and targets are identified, prevention strategies can be selected that match and address contextual risks. Empirically supported discrete prevention approaches that attend to contextual risks through a *macro environmental lens* are (a) addressing the social determinants of CSA, and (b) enhancing formal regulatory controls; or through a *micro environmental lens* (c) crime prevention through environmental design, and (d) situational crime prevention (SCP).

Addressing the social determinants of CSA is concerned with the 'causes behind the causes' (Quadara et al., 2015). This involves social reform targeting the structural, social and economic disadvantage that contributes to risk for CSA within the broader social ecologies in which children are embedded (Featherstone et al., 2018). Prevention strategies might address poverty, access to prevention resources, housing stress or overcrowding (Quadara et al., 2015). They might question social norms such as gender inequality, male entitlement or beliefs that children should not challenge adults. Whole-of-community approaches may attend to widespread stressors experienced by families in the local community, such as increasing the social supports available to parents, or hosting community-wide forums or education programmes on CSA prevention (Jack & Gill, 2010). Strengthening norms and values supporting respectful and healthy relationships for children and strengthening income and economic security are two of the seven strategies recommended by the World Health Organisation to reduce violence against children, including child maltreatment (WHO, 2020). Indeed, combining an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) with a social ecological framework provides a useful guide

for addressing known multiple social determinants that coalesce to increase risks for CSA. This approach shifts attention beyond discrete determinants of CSA, to acknowledge the real-world complexities and interconnections across sociocultural processes that limit opportunities for support and protection, and impact outcomes arising from CSA (Etherington & Baker, 2018; Nadan et al., 2015).

Formal regulatory controls refer to the legal, policy and protective services in place to protect children from abuse. Law reform provides an avenue for preventing CSA, given legislation prescribes behavioural standards and establishes appropriate consequences (punishment) for those who breach these standards. As such, it is an essential foundation underpinning police, justice and child protection responses to abuse. Implementing and enforcing laws to protect children from violence is another key prevention strategy proposed by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). Inquiries into CSA in institutional settings also shed important light on failings in organisational policy to appropriately respond to CSA, leaving children unsafe and at risk of prolonged abuse (e.g. the Australian Government Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; see Wright et al., 2017). Policy reform thus also plays a pivotal role in establishing the conditions necessary for the safety of children in organisational settings, and more broadly for expected standards of behaviour among adults in protective roles. Protective services including police, child protection and justice systems operate together to enact relevant laws and policies in response to CSA, highlighting the importance of law and policy reform in strengthening and improving the effectiveness of these systems for preventing CSA.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) is concerned with preventing crime (including CSA) by changing physical environmental conditions to reduce opportunities to offend and to increase surveillance. Based on defensible space theory (Newman, 1972), CPTED specifically focuses on the physical environment, and modifying the environment to 'design out crime' (Cozens & Love, 2015). With respect to preventing CSA, key elements of CPTED include surveillance (opportunities for behavioural oversight) and access control (controlling who has access to children). Environmental audits and movement mapping activities might be used to identify risks associated with the physical environment in a target setting, to inform prevention planning (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2022). Subsequent CPTED strategies might include enhancing surveillance such as by pruning trees and shrubs or installing CCTV to enhance line of sight surveillance in public spaces where risks have been identified, adding glass panels to school classrooms or interview rooms, or moving home computers out of private bedrooms into living room spaces, which are more easily supervised by parents. Access control strategies might include employee screening and monitoring visitors within youth-serving organisations to limit access of potentially risky individuals (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006).

The effectiveness of CPTED in reducing CSA is under-researched. One recent study, however, examined perpetrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of CPTED (and other) strategies for prevention of sexual violence (Chiu et al., 2021). This revealed that CPTED strategies were perceived to be effective, particularly in public rather than domestic settings. In this study, motion sensitive lights, CCTV and visibility were considered among the most effective CPTED strategies.

Situational crime prevention is the hallmark of prevention approaches targeting proximal factors external to the individual, and that may contribute to abuse risk. SCP targets the immediate situations in which crime occurs, aiming to prevent crime, including CSA, by altering physical or social aspects of a given situation that enable or facilitate abuse (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). SCP proposes 25 prevention techniques aimed at increasing the effort required to commit an offence, increasing the risk of detection, reducing rewards, reducing provocations and removing excuses (Cornish & Clarke, 2003). These 25 techniques were developed to prevent general crime; however, they also apply to preventing CSA (Morley & Higgins, 2018; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006).

For example, 'extending guardianship' and 'utilising place managers' are key strategies for increasing risk of detection. This might include training staff in youth-serving organisations to better identify and respond to CSA (Morley & Higgins, 2018), enhancing the capacity of community bystanders to actively contribute to protection (Banyard et al., 2004), or promoting open family discussion about safety and CSA and other protective parenting practices, such as establishing open door policies in bedrooms to reduce opportunities for abuse (McKillop et al., 2021; Rudolph et al., 2018). As a further example, pop-up warning messages, connected with internet searches for CSAM, may reduce a user's perceived sense of anonymity, thus increasing their perceived risk of detection (Edwards et al., 2021). Meanwhile, clarifying behavioural standards (e.g. codes of conduct, staff induction) or providing clear safety messaging and signage about the importance of child safety, or limiting physical contact, may help to remove excuses for CSA (Morley & Higgins, 2018). The four contextual prevention strategies are presented in Table 2.

Implement selected prevention strategies

It is important to implement any evidence-based strategy or programme with fidelity. Those responsible for implementation need to be adequately trained in the tasks they are required to perform, and relevant stakeholders (including young people, parents, staff, boards and community leaders) should understand the rationale for the strategy, and how

TABLE 2 Contextual prevention strategies for child sexual abuse (CSA).

Contextual prevention strategies	Examples
Macro lens	
Addressing social determinants of abuse (e.g. Quadara et al., 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing gender inequality • Addressing disadvantage • Developing housing programmes to reduce overcrowding • Reducing exposure to concerning sexual behaviour • Challenging norms conducive to CSA
Enhancing formal regulatory controls (e.g. Rayment-McHugh, 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law and policy reform • Enhancing protective services (police, justice system, child protection systems)
Micro lens	
Crime prevention through environmental design (e.g. Cozens & Love, 2015)	<p>Natural surveillance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pruning trees, adding lighting or CCTV to enhance surveillance in public spaces • Windows and doors with viewing panels may increase natural surveillance in organisational settings • Intensive guardianship at specific hot spots <p>Controlling access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safer recruitment strategies • Monitoring visitors to institutional settings
Situational crime prevention (e.g. Wortley & Smallbone, 2006)	<p>Increasing effort:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet filters • Law enforcement use of online peer-to-peer network monitoring to remove large libraries of child sexual abuse material <p><i>Increasing risk of detection:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing active guardianship among institutional staff, bystanders and family members • Placing home computers in shared spaces • Addressing barriers to disclosure <p>Reducing provocations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting the availability of alcohol or other disinhibiting substances • Safety planning with high-risk offenders <p>Removing excuses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear organisational policies outlining expected standards of behaviour and codes of conduct • Pop-up warning messages connected to child sexual abuse material websites to remind users that online child sexual abuse material is harmful

it will be supported (e.g. an organisation may embed responsibilities for key activities in the position description and performance management system for key actions).

Monitor or evaluate change

Plan for how to observe change, and the measurement tools required to support this. It is important to think about how ‘sentinel’ events are recorded (such as breaches of a ‘code of conduct’, complaints from clients or stakeholders, or disclosures from children or young people). For many strategies, especially when implemented in concert, there will be difficulty in attributing success to a single action or strategy. But some strategies are likely to have common indented outcomes (such as enhancing the capability of adults in safeguarding, increasing young people’s sense of safety, their self-reported likelihood of speaking up if they feel unsafe; see Russell & Higgins, 2020). If the strategy targets a very specific skill, consider where a change in skill level and its application could be observed. These monitoring activities could be enhanced through undertaking a ‘pre-post’ implementation comparison. More formal evaluation could include an independent assessment of the impact by external researchers. For families (including kinship and foster care families) or other informal settings that want to adopt a contextual prevention approach, these same principles can apply without the need for formal or structured record keeping. Parents and carers need to consider: what would things look like in my family if I was successful in enhancing our family’s prevention capability?

A comprehensive approach to contextual prevention: exemplar programmes

CSA is a complex social issue, requiring a comprehensive approach to prevention. Beyond discrete prevention strategies, this involves the selection, implementation and planned integration of multiple prevention strategies to address the

complex contextual factors assessed to contribute to CSA in each setting. Contextual Safeguarding (UK: Firmin, 2017), the Neighbourhoods Project (Australia: Firmin & Rayment-McHugh, 2020) and the Kaufman Situational Prevention Model (USA: Kaufman et al., 2012) are all examples of comprehensive approaches to contextual prevention. Each builds on contextual theories, integrates multiple contextual prevention strategies, and plans and coordinates these through stakeholders.

The UK's Contextual Safeguarding programme extends the reach of statutory child protection authorities beyond individual children and domestic settings, to the extra-familial contexts in which young people might be harmed (Firmin, 2017; Firmin & Lloyd, 2023, 2022). Extra-familial harms may be most relevant in adolescence, as young people naturally spend more time outside of the family home, such as in schools, parks, entertainment venues and transport hubs. Contextual Safeguarding involves the identification of extra-familial settings which present a risk of abuse, and the development of a comprehensive contextual prevention plan by key stakeholders, such as business owners, transport providers and local councils, led by statutory child protection authorities (Firmin & Rayment-McHugh, 2020). This might include guardianship training for local residents, physical design changes in a housing estate or a group programme for parents focused on supporting local youth.

Also building on contextual theories, but focused on First Nations communities in Australia, the Neighbourhoods Project designed, developed and implemented a suite of prevention activities aimed at creating safer environments for children in remote community settings (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015a; Tilley et al. 2014). Informed by a detailed analysis of CSA in the local community context (Smallbone et al., 2013b), strategies could be targeted at specific high-risk locations within each community and were designed to enhance guardianship (by peers, parents and professionals), reduce opportunities for abuse and to enhance informal and formal social controls across a range of community locations. Prevention strategies included training provided to teachers at a local school to build guardianship capacity to identify and respond to concerning sexual behaviours, an environmental assessment of school buildings to identify potential safety risks including opportunities to enhance surveillance on the school grounds and to monitor visitors to the school, and foot patrols undertaken by community police in the most at-risk community settings to enhance supervision rather than to respond to crime (Firmin & Rayment-McHugh 2020).

Kaufman et al. (2010, 2012) developed a Situational Prevention Model Approach, based on SCP, to guide prevention of CSA in organisational settings. The approach involves the engagement of organisational staff in a six-step process: (i) the assessment and selection of key organisational risks to be targeted; (ii) obtaining information from staff, volunteers and clients of the organisation, to improve understanding of selected risks; (iii) linking prevention strategies to each risk factor; (iv) prioritising which risks to address; (v) implementing prevention strategies for the prioritised risks; and (vi) monitoring and reassessment.

Together these examples highlight the focus on features external to the individual that help create safe environments and conditions for children. Importantly, they highlight a need for multiple contextual prevention strategies to be integrated into a comprehensive plan, to attend to the diverse contextual risks that drive CSA.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE STEPS

Contextual prevention comprises diverse prevention efforts that target factors external to the individual, to create safer environments for children and young people, acknowledged by the World Health Organisation as important for preventing violence against children (WHO, 2020). Contextual prevention is an umbrella term encompassing macro- and micro-level prevention strategies that address the structures that create conditions conducive to CSA. In combination with individually focused prevention strategies, contextual prevention contributes to a comprehensive prevention agenda for combatting CSA.

Contextual prevention is operationalised in five key steps, requiring the identification of a target setting, assessment of contextual risks relevant to that specific environment, selection of relevant prevention strategies that attend to identified risks, and finally implementation and evaluation. Discrete contextual prevention strategies include addressing the social determinants of abuse, enhancing formal regulatory controls, CPTED and SCP strategies, although a comprehensive approach incorporating and combining multiple contextual prevention strategies is recommended. Importantly, although this paper has focused on contextual prevention of CSA, applying a contextual approach to the prevention of sexual violence perpetrated by adults against children and young people, our definition of contextual prevention and its application is also likely to be beneficial in preventing other forms of interpersonal violence, particularly harmful sexual behaviour of children and young people towards others.

It seems likely that complexity in abuse contexts, and thus the varied targets that sit under the umbrella of 'context' may have inadvertently contributed to confusion about a contextual approach to prevention. The varied terms used by different contextual prevention scholars, for example, 'situations', 'contexts', 'places' and 'settings', simply reflect different components of the complex environments in which CSA occurs. Clarifying contextual prevention as an umbrella

term encompassing these different components may prevent some of the current confusion. Shifting from a traditional individual focus in policy and practice to a contextual focus also requires a radical shift in how CSA and its prevention is understood. There may be conflicting perspectives among professionals, and some level of resistance to this reconceptualisation (e.g. Wilson et al., 2022). These barriers must be addressed, and staff prompted and supported to broaden their understanding of CSA and its prevention, to advance the adoption of contextual prevention into mainstream practice. We hope the proposed conceptual definition and operational steps provide greater clarity for this purpose.

There is a critical need for evaluation research to test contextual prevention approaches. There is a strong evidence base supporting the effectiveness of SCP and CPTED with respect to other types of crime (e.g. Clarke & Bowers 2017), and thus good reason to have confidence in its relevance to preventing abuse. However, less research to date has evaluated the application to CSA, highlighting this as an urgent research priority, including understanding the effect of contextual prevention on the perceptions of safety of children and young people (Russell & Higgins 2021).

Importantly, contextual prevention should be implemented alongside individually focused prevention efforts, as part of a comprehensive prevention agenda. Thus, the issue is not whether to implement a contextual-focused rather than an individual-focused strategy. Implementing both types of strategies, together, in a coordinated way, will optimise CSA prevention. Smallbone and Rayment-McHugh (2017) present a nine-point comprehensive prevention matrix that can guide policy and practice and that integrates both individual and contextual approaches. This includes primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention, in accord with a public health model, alongside prevention targets spanning both individuals and settings. As well as individually focused prevention efforts (addressing risk of perpetration, and risk of victimisation), we must also target factors external to the individual, to address contextual risks, and create safer environments for children and young people.

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