This essay aims to critically reflect on the role of the practitioner in safeguarding and advocating for children, young people and families and the ethical implications to this. Through consideration of policy, legislation, theory and serious case reviews (SCRS) I hope to explore this sensitive landscape, delving into the assumptions often made about children and their development, and the potential impact to our safeguarding duties. Examining the SCRs of Victoria Climbie (Laming, 2003) and Ayeeshia-Jayne Smith (Halliday, 2017) I hope to make sense of the challenges we face, understand better those we are bound to protect, removing some of the unnecessary anxiety often linked to safeguarding (Gallagher and Sutton-Tsang, 2017, p.162). In addition, I will draw on my own autobiographical lens (Brookfield), using personal reflection to actualise how theory, policy and practice interconnect. Ethical considerations will therefore thread through this paper to ensure I maintain my integrity and professionalism throughout. (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

History depicts a slow start to the safety and welfare of our children, ironically animal cruelty acts preceding those of children (Powell and Uppal, 2012, p.10). The Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889, empowered police to arrest anyone found ill-treating a child, however explicitly stated in section 14, this did not affect the rights of the parent, teacher or person with lawful control to administer punishment to the child. Fast forward to 2018 and statistics estimate that over half a million children suffer abuse in the UK each year (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, (NSPCC), 2019). Startling as this figure is, most concerning is the 134.6% increase in offences in England since 2013, where a parent or carer ‘wilfully assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons or exposes a child under 16 in a manner likely to cause them ‘unnecessary suffering or injury to health’ (Bentley, H et al., 2018, p.32). Statistics make shocking reading, with the rises in reported child abuse potentially interlinked with evolving policy, raised awareness of duties and reporting mechanisms for this, however we must not forget the unknown cases. What we can assume is child abuse is as prevalent in today’s society as ever before, with a widening remit which now incorporates new challenges outside of the home such as on-line grooming and child criminal exploitation we need to learn from the past and adapt, facing this non-negotiable duty to safeguard with ‘persistence and courage’ (Laming, 2003, p.3), becoming an agent for hope in unpredictable terrain (Gallagher and Sutton-Tsang, 2017).

Accountability plays a key part in safeguarding children, the media often guilty of criminalising those who give their lives to protect children, anxiety enflamed through a toxic blame culture when things go wrong. Policy and legislation boldly state safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility achieved by ‘putting children at the centre of the system and by every individual and agency playing their full part’ (HM Government, 2018, p.9), but in practice bringing together of different professionals is not a simple process. Differing perspectives, culture and power dynamics potentially causing misinterpretation or omissions to dialogue and the sharing of critical information (Powel and Uppal, 2012). The tragic case of Victoria Climbie depicts this challenge, the Laming report listing 12 key occasions where relevant services missed opportunities to intervene, suggesting different professional organisations do not naturally share information outside their own circle of reference (Field, 2010).

Victoria’s case was pivotal in safeguarding history, the Green Paper Every Child Matters, (The Stationary Office, 2003) calling for a focus on early intervention, supporting both families and workforce. However, history depicts slow progress, policy and process accused of hindering and undermining safeguarding duties. It was the Munro Report, (2011) that first addressed the significant challenges multi-agency working presents, proposing a move from compliance to learning culture, giving more scope for professional judgement. Subsequent SCR’s continue to highlight inefficiencies in our systems, confidence in our safeguarding duties not indicative of actual knowledge (Dinehart and Kenny, 2015), structural processes not yet caught up to the empowerment and responsibilities of the professional.

Serious case reviews enable us to learn, reflect and evaluate, disseminating to others, (Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board, 2013). The review of Daniel Pelka stated professionals lacked an ‘enquiring mind’, still similar findings are reported in the death of Ayeeshia-Jayne Smith, 2 years on, where a lack of professional curiosity and inquisitiveness was presented as factors that could have prevented this tragedy. The focus on the parent’s needs overshadowing those of Ayeeshia-Jayne implies confusion, an imbalance between supporting the family unit and the protection of the child. The role of the professional is two-fold, ascertain risk and minimise risk (Rice, 2017), yet judging whether a child is at risk of significant harm is an impossible task, predicting outcomes a game of probability. I suggest a child raised in a toxic environment will always be at risk, a violent parent may go one step too far, a substance abusing mother may leave drugs accessible to their child. This constant turmoil we find ourselves in as we try to predict the unknown pitfalls of family life leave us battling with our own values. It is true that we should ‘all take responsibility to look out for signs of abuse, take action and refuse to tolerate cruelty to children by anyone’ (Wanless, 2016), but we must not excuse parental or even family responsibility within this remit.

Mc Dowall Clark (2010, p.41) defines family as a basic social group which provides ‘mutual social, emotional and economic security’. My personal definition goes deeper, idealising the family function as to love, educate, shelter, empower, support and evolve together, an organic structure requiring nourishment and an enabling environment to truly flourish. Environments however are susceptible to change, both internally and externally, the destabilising nature of government ideologies a risk factor for many families, the financial trade off between investment and outcomes at risk of causing inequality (Penn, 2014). This is reflected worldwide, single child policy restrictions in China, (Rogoff, 2003) just one example of how wider influences are shaping families today.

In times of change a well-functioning family is able to shift direction seamlessly (Pavord, 2019), however for many, unexpected change can alter the architecture of the family. Despite this the family remains a unique entity, comprising of individuals who share a shared history and future, (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005) values and beliefs created from experience and co-constructed through generations, weaved into their very fabric. Faced with adversity, tensions can distort the fabric, families, overwhelmed, lost in a cycle, problems magnifying, stunting feelings and stalling momentum (Walsh, 2015). Behaviours such as poor parenting and poor life choices disseminate through the generations at risk of causing a cycle of chaos, professionals required to navigate this (Lumsden, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory (Hayes et al, 2017) visualises how child development is fuelled by layers of influential environments surrounding them, and how these interact with each other through five distinct ecological systems. Critiques of this theory suggesting ‘the separation into nested systems constrains ideas of the relations between individual and cultural processes’ (Rogoff, 2003, p.48). My reading instigated reflection, visualising this ‘cycle of chaos’, through my own model, (figure 1.) recognising the critical points where disconnection may occur between family and the wider community as pivotal to the cycle effect. Ayeeshia-Jayne Smith was brutally murdered by her mother, Kathryn Smith. The circumstances of Kathryn’s upbringing or her partner are unknown, the SCR no longer publicly available, however media reports Ayeeshia-Jayne placed on a child protection plan pre-birth, indicating Kathryn was vulnerable, reports of self-harm, cannabis abuse and aggressive behaviour suggesting mental health issues. I must acknowledge here my restricted view of family history and lived experience however I predict there was a disconnection, leading to dysfunction and the waste of not one but three lives.

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| --- |
| Figure 1    Values and beliefs are formed pre-birth derived from the family unit we are born into, and our lived experience as we engage in the wider community. Working upwards through the model we  begin to co-construct unique values and beliefs which are then disseminated through the next generation. |

As our stories unfold and intertwine over multiple generations our roles and status evolve. Values and beliefs captured and influenced through a life’s course perspective (Hutchison, 2004), implying, ‘neither identity or culture are fixed but are dynamic and fluid and can be considered as relational and relative concepts’ (Smidt, 2013, 90). It is true ‘culture’ is a complex term to define and it is here I draw upon my visual representation (figure 1) defining culture as;

‘beliefs, norms and familial expectations pre-birth, intersected with life experiences, forming a moral foundation on which a social group lives their lives at a particular moment in time’.

Understanding culture is unnegotiable in our duties to safeguard, however sometimes culture can get in the way. Female genital mutilation (FGM) an example of emerging risks linked to cultural beliefs, with a startlingly 137,000 women and girls affected by FGM in England and Wales (NSPCC). I acknowledge this is an extreme example of cultural influence however propose we must remain conscious of the subtleties of culture and our assumptions around this, ‘assumptions about race can be just as corrosive in its effect as blatant racism’ Neil Garnham QC (Laming, 2003, 1.63). Working closely with the Gypsy Romany traveller community, arguably the most discriminated group in the UK, I witness a social acceptance of ‘respectful racism’ targeted at this community (Devarakonda, 2012), created from prejudices passed down through generations. Similarly, media attention on ‘troubled families’ (Levitas, 2012) create a stigma and inexcusable ignorance to the core values of these families. Our duty therefore is to ensure, signs of abuse are viewed, ‘objectively rather than through a cultural lens’ (Powell and Uppal, 2012, p.134).

The SCR of Victoria Climbie highlights how culture and perceptions of this obstruct safeguarding responsibilities. Victoria’s incontinence and injuries understood by the local pastor as the consequence of being possessed by evil spirits, prayer the only solution, bumps and bruises seen as normal for an African child. Comments by Victoria’s guardian as her being wicked, injuries self-inflicted, imply cultural beliefs may be present. The pastors reluctance to believe what he was presented with as abuse, either an example of his true cultural beliefs of the ‘evil child’ (Sorin, 2005), or his disconnection to what he was truly seeing. The reluctance to professionally challenge explanations of Victoria’s injuries and the cancelled home visit due to concerns of scabies suggests an emotional disconnection. Possibly fuelled by unconscious defence mechanisms to protect oneself, dehumanising what we see, removing the emotional cost and anxiety safeguarding evokes.

‘the absence of a containing space, enabling practitioners to reflect on and understand the difficulties they are witnessing, may result in an unconscious loss of vision, seeing but not seeing’ (Butler, 2015, p.20).

Safeguarding is an emotive subject illustrated best through the passionate reactions ignited by the Madelaine McCann case (Lusher, 2018). Twelve years, on differing perspectives still trying to make sense of this tragic event, suggesting our values and beliefs can hinder our responsibilities to support and connect with families. As individuals we are all a product of life experiences (Powell and Upall, 2012), affecting our interactions and capacity to listen and understand, when unaware of our truth we can act ‘mindlessly and without intention’ (Ricks and Bellefeuille, 2004, p.124). Reflection therefore plays a pivotal role in safeguarding children, a time to consider how to achieve the equilibrium of respecting family values whilst upholding children’s rights (Lindon and Webb, 2016). My own reflection on a safeguarding scenario (appendice 1), illustrates the power of a sensitive, reflective approach, empowering families opposed to disempowering through unfamiliar jargon and unclear processes. I recognised the need for robust policies to manage the potential seriousness of child abuse running parallel with a softer approach, avoiding the alienation of parents, enabling partnership working, honest dialogue and transparency in our duties. By stepping outside my own personal paradigms, acknowledging the ‘rough and tumble’ of family life (Gallagher and Sutton-Tsang, 2017), and avoiding scrutiny I can co-create a safer culture. Developing a mutual understanding of each other’s reality, (Ricks and Bellefeuille, 2004), and be the ethical practitioner I strive to be, protecting and safeguarding childhood.

Childhood despite being experienced by all is difficult to capture as a definitive concept, a happy and secure childhood unfortunately not a universal experience. Childhood memories although forceful are subjective, therefore developmental milestones add to personal experience, helping to normalise, condensing complexities into simple patterns (Penn, 2014). Defining normal however is equally problematic, research (Kelly et al, 2006) highlighting wide variations across ethnic groups in terms of parental expectation of what ‘normal’ is. Smidt (2013) suggests development of thinking comes from the interweaving of the biological and the appropriation of cultural or material heritage, supporting Bronfenbrenner’s thinking that the child’s ability to make sense of social situations enhance progression or hinder and negate it. This is depicted through the cultural lens of childhood, the terrible twos a phenomenon observed only in westernised countries, the reluctance of adults relinquishing control a possible factor. Similarly, other cultures perplexed by our need for sleeping strategies and pacifiers, the notion to sleep separate from their child perceived as a form of abuse. As differing cultures intersect in a multi-cultural and diverse world, we must consider the parameters to which we mould child development. Through recognising the origins of culture as implicit to child development (Rogoff, 2003), and respecting the historical and social nature within this the concept of childhood will continue to remould through natural cultural evolution (Mesoudi, 2016).

Cultural influence intercedes throughout a lifetime, adolescence being one of the key periods susceptible to external stimulus, this rapid phase of human development which observes the brain literally re-wiring can present a window of opportunity for social and educational development (Blakemore, 2012), a time of both possibility and vulnerability. I know nothing of Kathryn Smith’s lived experience as an adolescent but I can surmise mental health plays a significant part. Alison Cueller’s (2015) research, based in the USA suggests a mental health epidemic, focus on relieving symptoms without sufficient attention to long-term outcomes a contributing factor. Plomin’s provocative research (Anthony, 2018) proposes there is no cure as there is no disorder, instead a spectrum on which we are genetically placed, a predisposition embedded within that can be triggered by unpredictable events. The positioning of genetic inheritance above environmental influence provokes thought and confusion, Kathryn was described as devious, and manipulative, (O’Carroll, 2016) I suggest an ‘out of control child’ (Sorin, 2005) her violent and destructive behaviours a result of life experience opposed to a genetically proven condition. Despite the perplexing role of genetics and environmental influence children have one thing in common, ‘insatiable curiosity about the world and a love for the people around them’ (Huang, 2018). I may not be able to safeguard childhood but I can use this as a starting point, advocating for children at all stages of development.

Boylan and Dalrymple, (2009) portray a complex landscape in which child advocacy sits, suggesting adult frameworks as debilitating, presenting a power imbalance between the child’s voice and adult control. This was depicted by the recent nationwide climate strike, thousands of school children bringing the escalating ecological crisis to the attention of the world (Taylor et al, 2019). Opposition damned protesters, suggesting school is where true advocacy is learned, revealing an underlying arrogance that child advocacy is on adult terms only. To advocate we need to create a space to listen (Clark, 2017) remove bias in our interpretations and trust. I consider the concept of forest school, children developing outside of adult paradigms, freedom to explore and set own challenges, many achieving greater milestones outside the confines of a classroom (Constable, 2014). Despite children’s rights, children have less freedom than ever (Penn, 2014) portrayed as vulnerable and free from responsibility, there is a danger of disempowerment, a call for adults to relinquish control, ‘when a child has a sense of agency, they are able to make choices and decisions, and to have an impact on their world. (Gowrie, 2015).

A more recent challenge within the safeguarding spectrum is County lines a organised crime network exploiting children and young adults, after watching a television report (Countryfile, 2019), what resonated most was the presenters concluding comments, stating we need to drive out brutal gangs from the countryside. This concerned me deeply depicting a vivid image of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ culture, pushing crime back to where it came from opposed to eliminating child exploitation for all. This does not reflect true advocacy, and without addressing this I predict the victims of today will become the criminals of tomorrow. Child advocacy is a human right, (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2019). We need to trust our young people, listen and respect those confident to speak out whilst tuning in to those subtle nuances. On admittance to hospital Victoria Climbie was described as ‘very secretive’, (Laming, 2003:9.18), reluctant to answer questions. In the case of Ayeeshia-Jayne Smith a ‘prevailing sense of optimism’ was apparent, the parental voice distorting that of the child. Both cases failed in advocating for the child. We must recognise adults hold the power to bring those silenced to voice providing ‘a possible force for change and the promotion of social justice’ (Boylan and Dalrymple, 2009, p.91).

Becoming an agent of hope (Gallagher, 2019) within the safeguarding landscape requires key attributes, the ability to connect with communities, approachability, interpersonal skills to breakdown barriers that professionalism can subconsciously create and the capacity to be fluid in our responses and scope for support. Yet even with these skills in place the infrastructure around safeguarding can disable our best intentions. Serious case reviews provoke reflection however their ‘potential to deliver transformational change is limited… systems around them also need to change in order to deliver better outcomes for children’ (Blyth and Solomon 2012 p.45). The government publication ‘Putting Children First’ (Department for Education, 2016, p.30) visualises a system that works for every child, promoting innovation and professional freedom to enable the design of ‘organisational systems and practice framework’. Professionals need to seamlessly adapt between relinquishing control in order to trust and hear what families and children need from us, hold this carefully, then regain control in developing supportive systems. By truly listening we can ‘capture the complexity of contemporary society and global political and economic processes that influence children’s experiences’ (Williams and Rogers, 2016, p.72).

As I conclude this essay I recognise my thinking has changed, the ‘cycle of chaos; that fuelled my passion at the start of this journey diminished somewhat. A cycle is continuous, building momentum until it spirals out of control, careering off on a tangent, yet I have identified disconnection as a key element to both Victoria Climbie and Ayeeshia-Jaynes tragic deaths. Allen (2011, p.5) proposes early intervention can potentially break these cycles to ‘provide a social and emotional bedrock for the current and future generations’. I now see this from a different angle, the need to reconnect. As we face untold future challenges it is time to reconnect with families, adolescents, ourselves, the community, professionals and government. Multiple connections enabling us to compensate when some may waiver. Where we dehumanised, we need to humanise allowing space and time to listen, advocate and reflect. By embracing the challenges before us with courage and an open heart we can discover innovative ways to safeguard peoples well-being through a life’s course, building a ‘culture of responsive safeguarding of all children’ (Richards and Gallagher, 2019, p.91).

**Word count: 3250**

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**Appendice 1**

Reflective Journal: A Parents Perspective

February 17, 2019 11:50:37 AM

I am writing this journal after much reflection on a situation we have had in the setting this week.

A dialogue was initiated by a key person with a parent after their child had commented that they were sad because they had been naughty and mummy had hit them, the child is 2 years old and we had been keeping a close eye on him as he would often comment that he was sad and had been naughty. Mum was devastated by this disclosure and denied any hitting of the child. With the support of the key person they were able to talk through what might be causing the child's unhappiness and where this terminology was coming from. The result of the dialogue was that possible causes could be:

* A new baby arrival
* Dad working away
* The 'key person leaving

I notice a link here to significant changes in the child's ecological system (Bronfenbrenner). The term 'hitting' was thought to come from mum who would often ask the child to stop 'hitting' the baby, demonstrating an obvious issue with the child and their sibling.

The meeting ended positively with some strategies put in place to provide extra nurturing time for the child, and support offered to the parents regarding the child's behaviour, they were given an open invitation to come back to us after reflecting on the situation and they took this up both parents returning for a meeting the two days later.

This meeting was what instigated much thought, the mum arrived with the support of dad with a long list of items to ask. She hadn't slept worrying where this ‘cause for concern' was now going, what happened next? She told the key person she had read through 70 pages of the settings child protection and safeguarding policies to see if outside agencies would now be involved and found this very difficult to navigate with much information irrelevant.

Now I had thought my policies were of a very good quality, I had produced a brief leaflet telling parents of our duties to safeguard but this then signposted to our policies which were obviously not easy to understand. This links to my reading around this module with talks of the perplexity parents feel, with jargon and unfamiliar language isolating them at this times when they need us most to help them navigate this sensitive landscape. Reflection makes me realise 'parents as partners' was not really what was happening here despite our best interests, we were holding power over them through the hierarchy of our own safeguarding system. Now of course this needs to be in place especially in cases where abuse is or could be happening, and I must still exercise caution over the child discussed here, but it did make me pause to consider what actually is my role here?

Further reading of Lindon and Webb (2016), helped me clarify in my mind in cases where abuse is neither confirmed or unconfirmed, that my position is to identify vulnerable children through monitoring their well-being, then working with parents to help identify why this may be and putting steps in place to support the child, I am in fact an advocate for the child, articulating the experience of the child in the setting, something the parents may not be aware of outside of the family home. In fact we have had some parents when asking them to complete focus child sheets for our settings planning, they comment you know them better than us!

It is unarguable that my role to safeguard is complex, I need robust policies in place to manage the potential seriousness of child abuse however I also need a softer approach to avoid the alienation of parents, enabling us to work together, to have honest dialogue and be transparent in our duties. Going forward I will devise a better leaflet for parents which is more user friendly, more sensitive to family issues, and shows it is everybody's duty to safeguard children. Through visualising a step by step process, of early intervention and initial discussion I can hope to connect better with parents, be an authentic advocate for the child and fulfil my wider safeguarding duties.