



Department
for Education

The role of services in children's identity formation, and how this influences children's involvement in violence in England

Research report

September 2025

Authors: Dr Ana FitzSimons, Dr Emily MacLeod, Teresa Turkeimer, and Annalena Wolcke (RAND Europe) Dr Julie Harris, Dr Charlotte Woodhead, and Cristina Preece (Dartington Service Lab)



Government
Social Research

Contents

Executive summary	4
Rationale for this study	4
Methodology	4
Findings and insights	4
Contributions to evidence and why they matter	10
Introduction	11
Context and rationale	11
Methodology	11
Structure of this report	17
Chapter 1: How do children’s interactions with services influence the development of their identities?	19
Introduction	20
The influence of children’s interactions with services on identity development	20
Broader contextual influences on children’s identity development	29
Conclusion	31
Chapter 2: What experiences, with which services, are most important in influencing children’s identities?	32
Introduction	32
Experiences with education	33
Experiences with criminal justice services	34
Experiences with Children’s Social Care	36
Experiences of mental health services	37
Experiences with the youth work sector	38
Strengths-based approaches, involvement of children in co-design, and early intervention	39
Conclusion	40
Chapter 3: How are children’s experiences of services patterned according to their intersecting characteristics, and how does this influence children’s identities?	41
Introduction	42
Ethnicity	42

Special educational needs and disabilities and neurodivergence	44
Gender	45
Socioeconomic background	46
Family reputation	47
Experience in care	47
Intersectionality	48
Impact on identities	49
Conclusion	50
Chapter 4: How do identity-forming experiences of services in turn influence children's involvement in violence?	51
Introduction	51
Violence as a self-fulfilling prophecy	52
Violence arising from the search for belonging and mattering	52
Violence as a response to hopelessness	53
Violence as an attempt to achieve self-protection and safety	53
Violence arising from hypervigilance	55
Violence as a tactic to retain support	55
Violence as a means of self-expression	55
Protection against and resilience to violence	55
Conclusion	56
Chapter 5: What can services do that may influence children's identity development in ways that contribute to reduced involvement in violence?	58
Introduction	59
Build trusted relationships	59
Identify and nurture strengths	60
Provide children with new opportunities that help build aspirations and social and emotional skills	61
Ensure services are inclusive, accessible and flexible	62
Balance early intervention with responsive support	63
Provide long-term support where needed, and carefully prepare for transitions and endings	63
Include families and communities	64

Ensure staff have comprehensive skills, training and support within a service environment that is conducive to good practice	65
Strengthen collaboration between services	66
Involve children in meaningful co-design and co-production of services	67
Improve funding and resources	69
Address systemic biases	70
Conclusion	70
Conclusion	72
Reflections and implications for support services	72
Driving implementation: enabling sustainable progress	74
Addressing macro-level factors	74
Bibliography	76
Annex 1: Ethical and data protection considerations	79
Annex 2: The theory of ‘identities in practice’	81

Executive summary

Rationale for this study

This research report investigates the role of services in shaping children's identity formation, and how these identity-forming experiences in turn influence children's involvement in violence in England.

Previous research has highlighted how services can help protect children from (or increase vulnerability to), involvement in violence. There is, however, relatively limited research specifically exploring how children's identity development fits into these dynamics.

This study addresses a critical gap in the evidence base by focusing on the ways in which systems of support – including education, social care, youth justice, mental health and youth work services – affect children's sense of self, and how this influences their vulnerability to engaging in violence.

It contributes rich, qualitative evidence both from professionals working in the system of support, and from children and young people themselves, with the aim of informing more effective and equitable approaches to violence reduction.

Methodology

The study was designed with a strong emphasis on co-production, youth-centred perspectives, and anti-racist principles. Key components included:

- **Professional Interviews:** 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from a range of services, including education, police, youth justice, children's social care, health, clinical psychology, youth work, local authorities, and violence reduction partnerships.
- **Young People's Consultations:** Four one-to-one interviews and three workshops were held with a total of 15 young people aged 15 to 23, all with lived experience of various services and systems of support.
- **Co-Design Process:** The study team engaged with an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) of experienced practitioners and a Young Researchers Advisory Panel (YRAP) to shape the research questions, theoretical framing, data collection tools, and interpretation of findings and insights.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Transcripts of interviews and workshops were analysed using both deductive and inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns, supported by engagement with our EAG and YRAP to inform the focus and results of analysis.

Findings and insights

Mechanisms by which services shape children's identity development

Children's experiences with services can significantly influence their sense of self, self-worth, belonging, security, and aspiration. Our analysis identified several key themes that illustrate how these interactions shape identity development:

- **Negative and positive labelling:** The labels used by services – whether negative (for example, 'perpetrator') or positive (for example, 'resilient') – can have an important influence on children's sense of self. Negative labels can be internalised, reinforcing harmful identities, while affirming language can help to promote a sense of self-worth.
- **Binary and nuanced thinking:** Categorising children in narrow, binary terms (for example, as either 'victims' or 'perpetrators') oversimplifies their lived experiences. Particularly in the context of work to address children's involvement in violence, dichotomised thinking – especially when it results in children being viewed predominantly through a negative lens – risks obscuring not only their vulnerabilities but also their capacities and potential. This can in turn influence how children come to see themselves and their sense of belonging.
- **Thin and thick narratives:** Relatedly, focusing on 'thin' narratives (i.e. reductive, problem-saturated characterisations of children) risks framing children through their challenges alone. Focusing instead on the 'thick' narrative (i.e. a more complex, rich, nuanced and multi-faceted picture of a child's challenges, but also their strengths, interests, resilience and capacity for growth) is an important part of fostering a positive sense of self, aspirations and hopefulness.
- **Doing to and doing with:** 'Doing to' approaches – where decisions about children's support are made without their involvement – can feel disempowering for children. Collaborative, 'doing with' approaches that meaningfully involve children in decisions about the support they receive can help to foster children's sense of empowerment.
- **Inclusion and exclusion:** Exclusion from services, particularly schools or mental health support, can reinforce feelings of rejection, alienation, and hopelessness. Consistently accessible and genuinely inclusive support helps children feel valued, understood, and connected.
- **Trusted relationships:** Stable, empathetic relationships with professionals can provide crucial emotional security to vulnerable children, scaffolding resilience, self-belief, and positive identity development. These relationships also serve as a vital conduit through which children's aspirations can be supported, and emerging needs identified and effectively addressed.
- **Fragmented and coordinated systems:** When services operate in silos, children may experience support as fragmented and inconsistent, leading to feelings of fatigue, hopelessness, and a sense of not being heard or understood. This can undermine their ability to form trusting relationships with professionals. Coordinated, multi-agency approaches are essential to provide stable, holistic support and foster positive identity development for children with multiple complex needs.

- **Broader influences:** Children’s identity formation is shaped not only by services but also by wider contextual factors, including family, peer groups, socioeconomic conditions, and experiences of systemic discrimination. These not only shape identity directly but also mediate how children experience and interpret their interactions with services. Children’s identity formation is influenced not only by their interactions with services, but also by broader contextual factors such as family dynamics, peer relationships, socioeconomic conditions, and experiences of systemic discrimination.

Experiences of services that can have a transformative influence on children’s identities

Participants described a range of service experiences – both positive and negative – that they felt could be particularly influential or transformative in shaping children’s identities:

- **Education:** School environments can profoundly shape children’s sense of competence, belonging, and aspirations. The experience of exclusion from school was viewed by our participants as often having lasting negative impacts, reinforcing feelings of disconnection and limiting future opportunities.
- **Criminal justice:** Adversarial interactions with law enforcement services and other elements of the criminal justice system can erode children’s sense of security and trust in authority. Experiences of stop and search can leave children with a sense of being under suspicion, while punitive criminal justice responses may undermine children’s feelings of safety and belonging. Labelling children as offenders may also result in self-fulfilling prophecies.
- **Children’s Social Care:** Supportive, consistent relationships with trusted social workers have the potential to foster positive identity development. However, high turnover and inconsistency in care can disrupt this potential, sometimes contributing to feelings of instability, rejection, or invisibility. Young people also highlighted the importance of social workers consistently using positive, strengths-based language and practice, that emphasises and helps children to reach their potential.
- **Mental health services:** Barriers to accessing care – such as long waiting times or high thresholds – can leave children feeling dismissed and undeserving of support, particularly during periods of vulnerability. On the other hand, innovative models of community-based, co-produced mental health support can provide transformative support to children with high levels of need who might otherwise not have engaged with more traditional delivery models.
- **Youth work:** Relational, flexible, and strengths-based approaches commonly associated with youth work were viewed as especially impactful, offering children trusted relationships, emotional safety, and opportunities for growth, agency, and aspiration-building.
- **Broader practices:** Approaches that centre children’s strengths, meaningfully involve them in shaping services, and prioritise early, preventative support were seen as playing a particularly important role in fostering resilience and supporting positive identity development, across service settings.

How children's experiences of services are patterned by intersecting characteristics

The study suggests that children's experiences of services are shaped by intersecting characteristics, which can influence how they are perceived and treated:

- **Ethnicity:** Participants highlighted concerns about structural inequalities, bias, and stereotyping, which they felt may contribute to the disproportionate exclusion and criminalisation of Black children and children from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities.
- **Special education needs and disabilities, and neurodivergence:** Gaps in professional training and limited resources were seen to contribute to the misunderstanding and mislabelling of children who have special education needs and disabilities or are neurodivergent, potentially escalating conflict and increasing the risk of marginalisation.
- **Socioeconomic background:** Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were perceived to experience harsher disciplinary responses (for example, in education and criminal justice systems), lower expectations, and greater stigmatisation, compounding existing inequalities.
- **Gender:** Gendered stereotypes and normative expectations were reported to shape service responses. Some participants expressed concern that services may have less expertise in, or confidence responding to, girls' involvement in violence, with existing approaches often more geared towards boys.
- **Family reputation:** Children from families with a history of service involvement were seen as being at risk of being judged on their family's reputation, rather than as individuals. This was viewed as working to reinforce cycles of disadvantage and limit access to fair and supportive intervention.
- **Experience in care:** Looked after children were described as facing heightened instability and disrupted relationships with services, making it more difficult to build trust, security and a positive sense of self. Children living in residential care settings were also reported to be at risk of disproportionate criminalisation.
- **Intersectionality:** These factors do not operate in isolation. Participants emphasised how overlapping forms of disadvantage may intersect to shape children's experiences and identities in complex ways, potentially reinforcing exclusion, mistrust, and alienation.

Links between identity-forming experiences of services and involvement in violence

This report identifies a set of mechanisms through which children's identity-shaping experiences with services can, in turn, influence their involvement in or protection from violence.

- **Violence as a self-fulfilling prophecy:** When children are repeatedly labelled as ‘risky’ or as ‘perpetrators’, they may begin to internalise these identities, leading to behaviours – including violence – that align with how they are perceived.
- **Violence as a search for belonging:** Exclusion from mainstream institutions can leave children seeking connection and status elsewhere, including in peer groups involved in violence that offer a sense of acceptance and identity.
- **Violence as a response to hopelessness:** When services fail to nurture children’s aspirations or provide viable pathways to a better future, disillusionment can take hold. In these contexts, violence may appear to offer agency, opportunity, or hope.
- **Violence as self-protection:** Where children feel unsafe in their communities and lack trust in services to protect them, violence can be seen as a rational response—a means of defending themselves in the absence of reliable protection.
- **Violence as a response to hypervigilance:** Children who experience chronic insecurity and mistrust in support systems may develop heightened sensitivity to threat, resulting in reactive or pre-emptive aggression.
- **Violence as a tactic to retain support:** In some cases, children may view violence as a means of securing continued service engagement, using it to maintain access to support they fear would otherwise be withdrawn.
- **Violence as a form of self-expression:** When children feel overlooked, unheard, or denied recognition, violence may become a way to assert identity, autonomy, or emotional pain, particularly in the absence of other affirming outlets.
- **Protection against and resilience to violence:** By contrast, services that offer trusted relationships, emotional safety, and opportunities for growth can foster a strong sense of self-worth and belonging. These protective experiences help children process emotions, disclose risks, and reflect critically on alternatives to violence, strengthening their resilience in the face of adversity.

Insights for strengthening systems of support

The study identifies a set of insights which, if adopted and embedded throughout the system of support, would help promote positive identity formation and reduce children’s vulnerability to violence:

- **Build trusted, consistent relationships:** Prioritising relational practice helps ensure children have stable, long-term relationships with professionals who provide consistent support.
- **Adopt strengths-based approaches:** Focusing on children’s assets, interests, and aspirations – rather than solely their challenges – fosters self-worth and resilience.
- **Provide new opportunities:** Creating avenues for children to explore their interests, build skills, and develop aspirations supports growth, confidence, and a positive sense of the future.

- **Ensure inclusivity and accessibility:** Adopting flexible, inclusive approaches enables marginalised children to access the support they need and feel recognised and valued.
- **Balance early intervention with responsive support:** Meeting needs early – while maintaining the flexibility to respond to crisis – helps prevent escalation and builds trust in services.
- **Carefully manage transitions and endings:** Preparing children for service transitions or endings helps reduce feelings of rejection and supports long-term emotional security.
- **Involve families and communities:** Meaningfully engaging families and communities helps build more supportive environments around children, to scaffold positive identity development.
- **Equip staff with skills and support:** Providing staff with the right training, resources and supportive leadership strengthens their ability to deliver and embed relational, trauma-informed, and inclusive support.
- **Strengthen collaboration across services:** Coordinated, multi-agency working ensures more coherent, stable support and reduces the risks associated with fragmented service experiences.
- **Prioritise co-production with children:** Involving children in shaping the services that affect them helps to foster agency, self-efficacy, and a stronger sense of belonging.
- **Address structural inequities:** Tackling systemic bias and discrimination is vital to help bring about fairer, more equitable systems where all children can feel respected and supported.
- **Secure sustainable funding and resources:** Long-term, strategic investment is needed to enable services to consistently deliver approaches that support children's identity development and protect them from violence.

Services can't act alone, however. While frontline services play a crucial role in supporting children's identity development and reducing vulnerability to violence, they cannot achieve this in isolation. Meaningful and lasting change depends on political action to create the conditions in which supportive, inclusive practice can thrive. This includes investing in communities to ensure children in disadvantaged areas have access to high-quality education, healthcare, and youth services; promoting inclusion and equity by addressing wider structural inequalities, and societal attitudes that sustain exclusion and marginalisation; addressing economic inequality and promoting fair access to opportunity through action on child poverty, housing insecurity, income support, and secure employment; and strengthening family support by expanding access to mental health care, parenting programmes, and other family-focused services. Embedding these changes requires strategic political commitment, cross-sector alignment, and sustained investment beyond the remit of any single service.

Contributions to evidence and why they matter

This study makes several important contributions to the evidence base on children's identity development and involvement in violence:

- **Youth-led, co-designed evidence:** By centring the voices and lived experiences of children – alongside the perspectives of professionals – this research offers rich, contextualised insights grounded in young people's realities. Our participatory approach, co-designed with young people, strengthens the legitimacy, depth, and relevance of the evidence base.
- **New insight into how services shape identity:** The study provides a nuanced analysis of the ways in which services influence children's developing sense of self, feelings of belonging, and aspirations. It identifies a variety of pathways through which services can support or hinder the development of positive identities.
- **Linking identity formation to vulnerability to violence:** The research contributes to current understanding by exploring the mechanisms through which identity-shaping experiences of services directly shape children's vulnerability to or protection from violence.
- **An intersectional lens on service experience:** The research foregrounds how intersecting inequalities relating to ethnicity, gender, neurodivergence, socioeconomic and family background, and care experience, shape children's encounters with services, and how this can compound marginalisation and hinder equitable access to and engagement with effective support.
- **Systems-focused recommendations:** This study moves beyond analysis to offer clear insights for improving systems of support. It highlights inclusion, trusted relationships, coordination, early intervention, co-production, and structural reform as critical levers for change.

Overall, the purpose of this report is to provide critical evidence for policymakers, service leaders, and practitioners seeking to build more equitable, holistic, and child-centred approaches to preventing violence and supporting children to flourish.

Introduction

Context and rationale

This study is part of the ‘serious youth violence research programme’, which is co-led by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF), and aims to explore ‘how systems of support may protect young people from, or expose them to, involvement in serious youth violence’. ‘Systems of support’ are understood here as all the different services that work individually and together to support children, including education, health, social care, justice, and youth services.

Findings from previous research conducted as part of the serious youth violence research programme suggested that systems of support may play a role in the development of children’s identities, in ways that are relevant to children’s vulnerability to, or protection from, violence (Open Innovation team, 2023). There is, however, relatively limited research exploring perspectives on the complex and dynamic relationships between children’s experiences of services, their identity formation, and their engagement in violence in the UK.

This study, commissioned by DfE, builds on that previous work and contributes to the expansion of the (relatively limited) evidence in this area. Taking a view of ‘identity’ as one’s ‘sense of self’, the study explicitly examines whether, and if so how, interactions between children and systems of support in England influence children’s identity development in ways that affect their involvement in violence. It aims to identify lessons on how strategic changes to systems of support could better address children’s vulnerabilities and bolster protection against violence.

RAND Europe and Dartington Service Design Lab conducted the research from September 2024 to March 2025.

Methodology

This study involved in-depth qualitative consultation with two groups: children and young people affected by violence, and professionals working in a range of services across the system of support.

Research questions

The study provides indicative answers, based on the perspectives and insights of children and young people and professionals participating in this study, to the following research questions:

1. How (if at all) do children's interactions with services influence the development of their identities?
2. What experiences (if any), with which services, are most important in influencing children's identities?
3. How (if at all) are children's experiences of services patterned according to their intersecting characteristics?
 - a. How (if at all) does this influence children's identities?
4. How (if at all) do identity-forming experiences of services in turn influence children's involvement in violence?
5. What (if anything) can services do that may influence children's identity development in ways that contribute to reduced involvement in violence?

Co-design

To inform the design, conduct and results of the study, we convened and worked in collaboration with an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) of professionals from across police, social work, health, clinical psychology and youth work services with significant insight and expertise on the issues under study, and also engaged closely with Young Researchers Advisory Panel (YRAP) based at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire.

These two groups were engaged by the research team towards the start of the research project, and shaped the formation of research questions, theoretical frameworks and data collection tools, as well as supporting the recruitment of research participants. Their input was instrumental in ensuring that data collection tools, including topic guides for consultation with young people, were sensitive to young people's lived experiences and particularly the effects of trauma, and grounded in a nuanced understanding of young people's contexts.

The research team also consulted with these groups towards the end of the project, to inform the interpretation of findings, and develop key messages and implications. This participatory approach ensured that the research remained anchored in the realities of those directly affected, while also reflecting the practical insights of professionals providing frontline support.

The study was designed with young people at its centre and developed in close partnership with them. It was shaped to be sensitive to the impact of trauma on young people's lives, creating space for their voices to be heard safely and respectfully. The research also took into account how racism and inequality influence young people's experiences and aimed to respond to these issues through inclusive and thoughtful research practices.

Interviews with professionals

RAND Europe research team members conducted online, hour-long, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with 20 professionals working across education, police, youth justice, children's social care, health, clinical psychology, youth work, local authority inclusion services, and violence reduction partnerships.

Stakeholders were invited to participate by email and were provided with full information about what participation would involve. This included providing them with a Participant Information Sheet and Privacy Notice. Informed consent to participate was re-sought at the start of each interview.

The professionals we interviewed were purposively sampled, which involved identifying and recruiting individuals with particular knowledge and expertise related to the topics of interest. Some were known to members of our EAG, while others were identified through literature or online searches. A total of 91 professionals were invited participate, to reach our target sample of 20. The number of interviews was largely determined by pragmatic considerations of the timeline and budget of the research.

Professionals were asked a set of interview questions exploring topics related to our research questions, the focus and wording of which were co-developed in collaboration with the YRAP and EAG, and reviewed and approved by the Dartington Service Design Lab research ethics committee (LabREC), DfE and YEF.

Interviews and workshops with children and young people

Dartington Service Design Lab conducted online on-to-one semi-structured interviews with four young people aged 16 to 22 years with experience of contact with a variety of services including police, education, children's social care, mental health and health services. Subsequently, we also conducted three workshops with a total of 11 young people aged 15 to 23 years with experience of the same range of services. These young people were recruited through YRAP and the London Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) Young People's Action Group (YPAG).

Young people were invited to express their interest in taking part through contact with a range of gatekeeper organisations and individuals, including the VRU YPAG, Safer London and contacts in the youth justice system provided by YEF and our Expert Advisory Group members. These organisations and individuals were provided with information about the study to share with potential participants. Interested young people were given an information sheet and offered time to ask any questions they had before taking part. All young people provided fully informed written consent prior to participation.

Support was put in place for participating young people, with staff at gatekeeper organisations debriefing and/or offering to check in with young people following their participation.

The topic guide and study materials were reviewed by the YRAP with several amendments being made to enhance their accessibility, sensitivity and meaning. Materials were also reviewed and approved by LabREC, DfE and YEF. Young people were asked a series of questions about their interactions with services, and influences of service interactions on identity formation and behaviour.

To inform discussions in the three workshops, data from the four interviews were first analysed thematically and any overlaps with emerging findings from the professional interviews were identified. From this, four broad topics reflecting greatest overlap with the professionals' findings were used to guide group discussion (trusted relationships, being treated like an individual, mental health, and labelling). This allowed us to sense check the topics, to explore each topic in greater depth, and to refine themes within those topics from young people's perspectives. For each topic, we facilitated in-depth discussion, exploring their experiences across different services they had interacted with. We invited participants to respond to prompts about how interactions with services influence different groups of young people in their experience. Also, to identify practical implications and suggestions for how to improve the system of support.

All young people received a gift voucher as a token of gratitude for their time (a £20 Love2Shop voucher per hour of participation).

Data analysis and reporting

Interviews with professionals and consultations with children and young people were recorded and transcribed, and data were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis involved systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Deductive coding was guided by the research questions, while inductive coding allowed novel insights to emerge.¹ Initial inductive codes were generated by reviewing transcripts, and recurring patterns were grouped into broader themes. Analysis of interviews with professionals was led by RAND Europe, and analysis of interviews and workshops with young people was led by Dartington Service Design Lab, with regular communication throughout the analysis period to share emerging codes, themes, and insights.

¹ Deductive coding involves analysing data based on predefined themes or concepts (in this case, our research questions). Researchers create a coding framework before analysing the data and apply it systematically to categorise information. Inductive coding involves identifying themes directly from the data without a predetermined framework. Researchers read and analyse the data iteratively, allowing themes to emerge organically based on patterns, meanings, or repeated ideas.

Once initial findings had been generated by the research team, meetings with YRAP and EAG members were held to discuss, interpret and refine findings and implications. This enabled the study to benefit from their expertise and experiences.

The findings set out in this report are labelled with anonymised participant identifiers to illustrate how widely concepts were reported. For professionals the labels P01 to P20 are used, while for young people the labels YP01 to YP04 and YP group 1 to YP group 3 are used.

Ethics

This study was co-designed with YRAP and EAG members, and the study protocol was approved by Dartington Service Design Lab's research ethics committee (LabREC). Further information on the ethical considerations informing this study and on how we protected participants' data is available in Annex 1.

Limitations

This research project was subject to a number of limitations.

The participant sample size was small, consisting of 20 professionals and 15 young people. As a result, findings are not expected to be representative of any particular group or experience, nor generalisable beyond the sample. Our reliance on purposive sampling, which identified potential participants from networks and online searches rather than using a random selection, introduces the potential for bias in our sample, which may have influenced the range of perspectives included in the study. Additionally, the study did not achieve data saturation, meaning that certain perspectives or themes may not have been fully explored or captured. While every effort was made to incorporate diverse viewpoints within the sample, the study was constrained by practical limitations of time and resource availability.

Further, this study did not include any comprehensive review of relevant literature, and this may have limited the extent to which the research is grounded in existing theory and evidence.

The findings should therefore be understood as indicative rather than definitive insights into the experiences and perspectives of children and professionals working with them.

Nonetheless, the significant overlap observed between young people's and professionals' insights on the mechanisms linking experiences with services, identity formation, and violence does help to enhance confidence in the relevance of our findings. Further research would be beneficial to build upon and refine the central themes our study has identified. The alignment between stakeholder perspectives also suggests that

the findings offer a useful starting point for generating hypotheses that could be tested in future research to further understand causal pathways.

Our theoretical frameworks

Before setting out the findings of this research, we first seek to clarify our understanding of two central concepts under study here: children's risk of becoming involved in violence, and children's identities.

Our understanding of risk is informed by contextual and complex safeguarding frameworks. These approaches emphasise that the nature of children's needs, the risks they face, and how they experience those risks, often change from early childhood to adolescence. Children may come to face a new set of complex risks – including the risk of involvement in violence. As Firmin et al. (2016) note, this risk may:

- often manifest in extra-familial environments such as schools, public spaces and online platforms
- be informed by peer relationships and norms
- involve children engaging in harmful behaviour as well as being harmed
- be beyond the control of parents
- sometimes present as though it is the result of perceived 'choices' made by a child, but often involve grooming, coercion, threat, and exploitation that can create a climate of fear and reduce engagement with services

Our approach to understanding children's identities is informed by work on 'identities in practice', which views identity as constantly in development and improvised in the flow of social contexts (rather than stable and unchanging).

The concept of identities in practice was first developed by US scholars Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte Jr., Debra Skinner and Carole Cain in their book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (1998). Central to the concept of identity in practice is that identities are not fixed, but always 'unfinished and in process' (Holland et al., 1998), mirroring previous sociological and philosophical understandings of identity as constantly in development (Hall, 1996).

Identities are also 'improvised – in the flow of activity with specific social situations – from the cultural resources at hand' (Holland et al., 1998). In this way, identities in practice can be considered not as 'things' that we have or are, but as what we do in order to become who we want to be (Watson, 2008). Identities therefore unfold through our interactions with the world and cannot be separated from the contexts within which they develop.

This concept of identity allows for the influence of both structure and agency. Holland et al. (1998) draw upon these ideas to conceptualise how people interpret the social and cultural worlds around them and, relatedly, how people see themselves in these worlds. Holland et al. (1998) state that combining ideas from Bakhtin and Vygotsky allows them to develop an understanding of ‘humans as social and cultural creatures and therefore bounded’, whilst also recognising ‘the processes whereby human collectives and individuals often move themselves’. According to Urrieta (2007), this approach enables the concept of identities in practice to ‘move us away (but not completely) from cultural determinism and situational totalitarianism to make (some) way for the importance of improvisation and innovation (agency)’. In this way, the concept of identities in practice could be interpreted as a response to sociological debates on the relationship between structure (i.e., notions of predeterminism), and agency (i.e., individuals’ free choice) in identity (Sewell, 1992).

Holland et al. (1998) propose that people practice their identities through four interrelated ‘contexts of activity’, which are relevant to our study:

- **Figured worlds:** these are the different social spaces people move through, such as peer groups, families, or services, in which people develop a sense of self, based on shared ideas and expectations
- **Positionality:** this is about how people are seen and treated (or, positioned) in social spaces, depending on, for example, their background, social status, and the roles available to them
- **Self-authoring:** this concerns the way people shape their own identities, by accepting, rejecting, ignoring, or negotiating and reshaping the roles and labels given to them
- **Making worlds:** this is when people create change with existing social spaces (or, create new ones), shaping new ways of being and interacting with others

For further discussion of this theoretical framing and its application in this study, please see Annex 2.

Structure of this report

- Chapter 1 sets out participants’ perspectives on the ways in which interactions with and experiences of services shape the formation of children’s identities
- Chapter 2 looks in greater detail at our participants’ perspectives on some of the key moments and experiences that have a particularly transformative influence on children’s identity formation
- Chapter 3 goes on to examine participants’ perceptions of how those experiences are patterned by intersecting characteristics
- Chapter 4 considers their views on the mechanisms through which identity-shaping experiences, in turn, affect vulnerability to violence

- Chapter 5 sets out suggestions for how services and the system of support as a whole can influence children's identity development in ways that contribute to reduced involvement in violence

Chapter 1: How do children's interactions with services influence the development of their identities?

Key messages:

- **Negative and positive labels:** The way services label children can profoundly influence their sense of self and becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. When negative labels (such as 'perpetrator') are internalised by children, this can reinforce a harmful sense of sense.
- **Binary and nuanced thinking:** Categorising children in binary terms (for example, as either 'victims' or 'perpetrators') oversimplifies their experiences. More nuanced approaches are needed, that recognise the complexities of children's lives.
- **Thin and thick narratives:** When services focus on 'thin' problem-saturated narratives about children, they risk reducing children to their difficulties. To promote self-worth and growth, it is important for services to keep in mind 'thick' narratives that acknowledge children's strengths and potential, as well as their challenges.
- **Doing to and doing with:** Services that impose interventions and support on children without their input can make them feel powerless, while collaborative, co-designed approaches can help to empower children and foster a sense of agency, engagement and trust in support systems.
- **Exclusion and inclusion:** Experiences of exclusion (whether from school, mental health services, or other support) can reinforce a sense of rejection, alienation and lack of belonging. Inclusive services that demonstrate determination to provide support can help children to feel valued, seen, and worthwhile.
- **Trusted relationships:** Stable, trusting relationships with professionals play a crucial role in shaping children's self of self, creating space for children to express their needs and concerns, receive support that helps address vulnerabilities, explore their strengths and interests, and develop their world views, confidence, self-worth and aspiration.
- **Fragmentation and coordination:** When services operate in silos, children's experiences of the system of support may be disjointed and inconsistent. Coordinated, multi-agency approaches are needed to create a more stable and supportive environment for identity development.
- **Identity development beyond services:** A wide range of other factors, (from family and peer relationships to community environments, socioeconomic conditions, experiences of structural inequalities, and social media) not only shape identity directly but also mediate how children experience and interpret their interactions with services.

Introduction

Findings from this study indicate that children's interactions with services play a significant role in shaping their identity development. There was broad agreement among the professionals and young people we spoke with that services influence children's sense of self and self-worth, their understanding of the world around them, their aspirations and perceptions of opportunities and constraints, and their feelings of safety and trust. A range of themes emerged from our interviews and workshops.

Participants highlighted how identity formation can be affected by the extent to which services: place negative or positive labels on children; hold binary or more nuanced understandings of children's identities; focus on 'thin' problem-saturated narratives or 'thick' narratives that include recognition of children's assets and strengths (which young people referred to as 'being treated like a person'); impose practice upon children or work collaboratively with them; exclude children from support or work flexibly to ensure support is accessible; provide trusted relationships; and coordinate across the system of support or else provide children with a more fragmented experience. The following sections examine these themes.

The influence of children's interactions with services on identity development

Negative and positive labels, and self-fulfilling prophecies

Most professionals and young people we spoke with expressed the view that **the language services use to describe children can have a lasting impact on children's sense of self.**² Reflecting the sociological theory of labelling first proposed by Howard Becker (1963), these professionals emphasised that children are conscious of the labels assigned to them and may internalise and ultimately identify with them.³ This process can create a **self-fulfilling prophecy, in which children adopt a sense of self, and behaviours, that align with the labels assigned to them.**⁴

In this sense, both positive and negative labels can become self-perpetuating, expressing expectations that shape development of identities aligned with those expectations. The

² P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P08, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P20, YP01, YP02, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 3.

³ Becker theorised that 'deviance' is a consequence of external judgments, or labels, that modify the individual's self-concept and change the way others respond to the labelled person. Once an individual is labelled as 'deviant' in some way, they may come to internalise the label, which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which their behaviour increasingly aligns with the expectations associated with that label. Becker's theory emphasises the role of social reactions in shaping identity and behaviour, suggesting that it is not the individual's inherent qualities, but the societal response to an individual and their actions, that primarily shapes development of deviant behaviour.

⁴ P01, P06, P08, P15, P16, P18, P20, YP02, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

use of labels with negative connotations, such as ‘perpetrator’, ‘offender’, ‘troublemaker’, ‘disruptive’, ‘risky’, or ‘attention-seeking’ to describe children can therefore be deeply damaging, creating obstacles to positive identity development, rather than fostering opportunities for growth.

Relatedly, some professionals expressed the view that the use of any variant of the term ‘perpetration’ in relation to children (such as ‘children who perpetrate violence’) is unhelpful: this framing assigns an inappropriate degree of moral blame and culpability to children who have yet to reach maturity. Alternative, more descriptive and morally neutral terminology (such as ‘children who are involved in violence’, or ‘children who have engaged in violence’) is available, which neither assigns blame nor precludes accountability, but leaves room for responses that hold children appropriately responsible for their behaviour while providing meaningful support to reshape their trajectories.

Participants also highlighted the importance of professionals and services frequently using positive language to describe children. This could include, for example, describing a child as ‘expressing a need for support’ rather than ‘attention-seeking’. From a practical perspective, this use of language can take place in multiple contexts, including direct conversations with children, discussions among professionals, written case notes, referrals, and official letters or documents. The importance of conversations between children and professionals being characterised by ‘consistent positive affirmation’ was also highlighted among young people. This positive affirmation was described as a way to help counter the influence of more negative narratives that children feel are applied to them.

“A lot of children have experienced being labelled throughout their younger years and into their adolescence, and they find it really hard to shift those labels. They don't know how to shift those labels. [...] Once they've been given a label, they think, ‘well, I might as well go with it.’ Because they haven't necessarily been given or learned that emotional resilience to overcome that.” (P20)

Some young people emphasised that, as childhood is a time of life when identity development is more influenced by others' impressions, children are particularly susceptible to labelling or stereotyped language. On the other hand, other young people spoke about their rejection of such labels, and about experiencing a drive to ‘overcome’ them. Notably, these young people cited sources of support available to them that helped them achieve this, such as strong faith, community, and a trusted relationship with a teacher.

In addition to the potential for labels to be internalised, some participants also expressed a concern that labelling may directly influence the level of support offered to a child.

“There may be young people who are labelled in one way and that means that they’re less likely to be seen as a young person in need as well, in whatever context, be that social care, be that young people who might need support to be kept safe when they themselves are seen or labelled as somebody causing harm.” (YP group 3)

Binary and nuanced thinking

Similarly, some professionals raised that the extent to which services and professionals **retain nuance, and avoid binary thinking, when understanding children and their needs and circumstances** can have an important influence on children’s identities.⁵ Binary categories that ascribe to children identities of *either* ‘victim *or* perpetrator’, ‘good child *or* bad child’, ‘at risk *or* a risk’, and so on, were viewed as particularly unhelpful for thinking about children who may be vulnerable to engaging in violence. These professionals highlighted that such categories are not dichotomous and emphasised that many children who engage in violence have themselves experienced violence and other harms, while engagement in an act of violence can itself be traumatising for a child. This reflects existing evidence of a very significant overlap between children who have experienced violence against them, and children who have engaged in violence towards others (YEF, 2024a).

Nonetheless, in practice, services can reinforce binary thinking. For example, intervention models and risk assessments may use professional language that categorises children as either victims or perpetrators, either at risk or a risk. This case categorization can, in turn, influence referral pathways, directing children toward safeguarding services if they are seen as victims, or criminal justice interventions if they are seen as offenders. As Huegler and Ruch (2022) note, ‘the splitting involved in creating binary, ‘either/or’ categories (such as who presents ‘a risk’ and who is ‘at risk’) may be a defensive response to overwhelming anxiety and complexity’ among professionals working with children involved in or vulnerable to violence, as it ‘provides a false sense of certainty and simplicity’. However, professionals we spoke with cautioned that **binary thinking risks ascribing a comprehensively negative identity to children who are vulnerable to or engaging in violence**, and so pathologizing them, rather than recognising and addressing both other aspects of their identities, and the environmental and systemic factors at play. While, according to one professional, ‘the system finds it really hard to hold onto nuance’,⁶ doing so is crucial for supporting children involved in violence to develop a positive sense of self.

⁵ P01, P05, P06, P11, P16.

⁶ P16.

“We either see young people as criminals, or we see them as vulnerable and complete victims. [...] That doesn’t support young people to really think about their own agency and choice and resilience and empowerment and own community connections that may support them in different directions.” (P16)

While the issue of binary thinking did not arise within the young people’s narratives, they did express a desire for professionals to take a more nuanced view of who they are, and to recognise their complexity, as explored further below.

Thin and thick narratives

A further, related theme from interviews with professionals concerns the importance of the overall narratives that services and professionals hold about the children they work with. Some participants noted that professionals can, at times, operate with **‘thin’ or ‘single-storied’ narratives about children accessing their services, which tell a simplified and often negative story about the child’s behaviours, characteristics or needs.**⁷ Thin narratives tend to focus on ‘the problem’ for which the child was referred to the service, but, in doing so, frame the child through their challenges. These professionals noted the **importance of professionals focusing instead on the ‘thick’ narrative: a more complex, nuanced and multi-faceted picture of a child’s challenges, but also their strengths, interests, resilience and capacity for growth.** Focusing on these aspects of a child can help professionals deliver work that helps promote positive identity development by scaffolding children’s aspirations, self-belief and self-efficacy.

“Services often have a dominant story about a young person, what we might call a problem-saturated story, that has their identity as being a thin, one-dimensional thing: ‘You’re bad. You’re violent.’ [...] But my approach is to work with all the other parts of their identity that those thin stories just completely obscure.” (P01)

Young people also spoke to this concept, describing ‘being treated like an individual’ or ‘like a person,’ and contrasting this with approaches they felt to be more reductionist and dehumanising.⁸ They referred to times at which they felt they were being reduced to a label (for example, ‘attention-seeker’), a behaviour (for example, ‘disruptive’), or a group or category (for example, a student or a racialised/ethnic group), rather than being viewed more holistically as an individual with their own complexity, and having the context of their behaviours recognised. These ‘thin’ labels and narratives led to young people not feeling seen or valued beyond a simplistic view of their problems. Some

⁷ P01, P02, P04, P06, P08, P11, P14, P16.

⁸ YP01, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 3.

young people suggested that this can, in turn, inhibit the creation of trusted relationships because the narratives about them feel inauthentic.

The ways in which the ascription of negative labels, comprehensively negative identities, or thin, problem-saturated narratives influence children's identity development can be further understood through the lens of the 'identities in practice' theoretical framework. Through this lens, labels and narratives inform children's sense of their position relative to others – or positional identity – within a service or wider system. This can have a profound impact on children's sense of self and their perceptions of their potential futures within particular contexts, but this influence is not automatic or deterministic. Acknowledging the space for 'self-authoring' enables us to recognise children's susceptibility to accepting the identities ascribed to them, while also leaving room for the possibility that they may (depending on past experiences and the resources available to them, among other things) reject, negotiate, or ignore them.

This 'self-authoring' was illustrated by some young people's rejection of negative labels, and also by their 'reclaiming' of other labels. In one example, a young person described turning the 'attention-seeking' label they had received from social care workers into a positive self-view, as someone not afraid to speak up and advocate for themselves and others.

Doing to and doing with

Another common theme from our interviews with professionals was that the nature of the relationships between children and service providers can significantly shape how services influence children's identities. There was a view that **children can feel disempowered when services adopt a 'doing to' approach that treats them as passive recipients of support** rather than active participants in their own development.⁹ This was contrasted with a 'doing with' approach, that is collaborative and values children's voices. A 'doing with' approach could involve:

- Asking children about their needs, preferences, and goals rather than making assumptions
- Involving children in decision-making, such as co-developing support plans
- Providing meaningful choices, such as selecting the type of activities they engage in
- Creating safe spaces for feedback, where children can share their experiences of support

⁹ P01, P02, P03, P08, P11, P14, P15, P16.

- Encouraging self-advocacy, by equipping children with the skills and confidence to express their needs and navigate services independently

Professionals noted that **‘doing with’ approaches can help foster a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy**, as children view themselves as more in control of their own lives and futures, and reduce feelings of dependence on services. They suggested that services that encourage children’s agency and provide opportunities for them to have a say in the support they receive are more likely to promote positive identity formation and particularly an agentic sense of self.

Young people we spoke with also raised a similar perspective, emphasising the importance of being spoken to rather than feeling that professionals are speaking past them, being offered the space to co-create the support being offered to them, and being involved in decisions or offered more information about the rationale behind decisions affecting them.¹⁰

In the language of ‘identities in practice,’ ‘doing with’ approaches offer children opportunities for ‘world-making’: while children are shaped by their experiences with services, their voices may also shape and contribute to change within the system of support.

Exclusion and inclusion

The **degree of inclusion or exclusion children feel or experience in certain support services was described by professionals and young people as important in shaping their identity development.**¹¹ These participants commonly raised that exclusion from school or mental health services can leave children feeling alienated, isolated, unseen, unheard, unworthy of help, distrustful of services, and let down by the systems meant to help them. Insights from work on ‘identities in practice’ help make sense of these dynamics. If children develop their identities, in part, through the positions offered or available to them in particular contexts, the withholding or withdrawing of a child’s position symbolises their rejection from that world.

“Once young people have felt excluded, whether that’s through school exclusion or through being rejected by services or not finding services accessible, and not feeling accepted or acceptable, that can really enhance their perception of themselves as not being connected to the wider societal context. [...] Social stigma, biases and assumptions get magnified in terms of their own sense of self or their own sense of what their possibilities are within the world.” (P16)

¹⁰ YP01, YP03, YP04, YP group 3.

¹¹ P03, P04, P05, P06, P07, P09, P11, P12, P15, P16, P17, P20, YP01, YP03, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

These professionals and young people described exclusion from key support services as leading children towards an overall sense of hopelessness regarding their futures and their ability to pursue opportunities to live a flourishing life. This **exclusion may potentially drive children to seek validation and belonging from negative sources**, including peer groups who use violence, which can serve to reinforce harms. Some young people also referred to the anger and frustration that can result from experiences of exclusion, which they may seek to discharge in other ways.

On the other hand, inclusive approaches that reflect and demonstrate the determination of a service to provide support can not only provide children with the help they need to build and sustain a positive sense of self, but also promote the sense that they have a place in society and are worthy of support and success. In one group discussion, young people identified an example of a mental health support model (the Green House), which they felt offered this inclusive approach and which they contrasted with other more negative experiences. The Green House aims to take a trauma-informed approach to supporting survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and provides creative therapies, family centred support and co-designed services.

Trusted relationships

The majority of professionals and young people we spoke with described the importance of trusted relationships to children's identity development.¹² Particularly for children with few, or no, safe and trusted adults in their lives, the **development of trusted relationships with professionals can play a vital role, creating space for children to express their needs and concerns, receive support that helps address vulnerabilities, explore their strengths and interests, and develop their world views, confidence, self-worth and aspiration.**

Young people spoke particularly positively about the impact of relationships they had built with individual teachers and social workers on their sense of self. As identified by professionals, for these young people such trusted relationships offered spaces for them to be seen, heard, treated like a person, and receive affirmation of their positive attributes, which they explained helped to foster greater confidence, motivation, and self-belief. These relationships also provided important routes through which support was elicited, development opportunities offered, and red flags or safeguarding concerns picked up.

¹² P01, P04, P05, P06, P07, P08, P09, P11, P14, P16, P17, P18, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

“When there has been one or several trusted relationships with professionals, I’ve seen that have a hugely significant influence on young people feeling that they are worthwhile, that somebody else has been witness to their potential, or taken them seriously. Feeling that they’re a valued human being.” (P16)

These findings support existing evidence from the Youth Endowment Fund (2024b), showing that the development of trusted relationships between children and professionals is an important protective factor that can reduce children’s vulnerability to engaging in violence.

Fragmentation and coordination

Finally, professionals and young people described how, for children who experience multiple services, identity development can be affected by the degree of coherence or disjointedness in support.¹³

Some professionals described children’s sense of frustration when engaging with multiple services without making meaningful progress. **Being required to retell their experiences to different professionals, with no clear continuity or follow-through, and no transitional support between services, can create a sense of fatigue, discomfort, and hopelessness** based on a feeling that no one has really heard, understood, or remembered their story. Having to repeatedly explain traumatic or deeply personal experiences to different professionals may also retraumatise children.

Some professionals and young people emphasised that fragmented experiences can leave children feeling as though they are ‘being passed around’ between agencies, rather than receiving carefully planned and effectively coordinated support. As a result, professionals noted, **some children become increasingly disengaged from services because they feel nothing will change, no matter how many times they tell their story**. In some cases, the ‘emotional toll’ and instability of engaging with a series of professionals, services and interventions, without tangible results, can leave children so worn down that they fully disengage or withdraw from services. Similarly, some young people highlighted that this could engender a sense of hopelessness and disengagement.

Both professionals and young people noted that frequent switching between services and professionals can not only undermine a sense of continuity in the support provided, but also **diminish a child’s ability to develop trusting relationships with any individual professionals or services in future**.

¹³ P03, P04, P05, P06, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, YP01, YP03, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

Further, professionals identified that a lack of coordination between different services, and the absence of a shared understanding of a child's needs and strengths, and a shared strategy, means that the same child may receive conflicting messages from different professionals. **Disjointed messages can cause confusion** while leaving children feeling unsupported, misunderstood, isolated, and as though no one is working collaboratively to address their needs holistically.

Another recurring theme from interviews with professionals was that **behaviours or needs are too often treated as isolated problems**. These professionals noted that services often tend to focus on one aspect of the child's life (with, for example, CAMHS focusing on mental health, children's social care on safeguarding risks, and youth justice services on offending behaviours), **without addressing how these aspects are interconnected**. One professional described how they had witnessed children accessing several support services, with each trying to address their own remit, rather than looking at the full picture and coordinating to deliver a coherent, joined up and holistic approach.

Professionals suggested that children who access a range of different services, focused on different problematised aspects of their lives, **can come to feel that they are the problem**, or at least that they are viewed as a problem. Some professionals noted that when children are moved through various services or professionals, they may **internalise the idea that they are unworthy of a consistent and supportive environment**, which can contribute to feelings of rejection, abandonment, and a lack of purpose.

Both professionals and young people also highlighted the **importance of carefully preparing for and managing intervention endings and transitions**, in order to avoid children developing a sense of rejection or frustration at being passed to the 'wrong' service, and to foster resilience beyond the duration of support.

"Depending on how successful the intervention has been, [intervention endings ...] can lead a child to self-identify with rejection and not feeling good enough. Because, unless that project exit or closure is managed in a really sensitive and informed way, [...] they could associate that ending with themselves. It makes them think, 'actually, you know what, somebody else who's come in to my life, and gone again. I've built up relationship and then it's not worked out for whatever reason. And actually I failed again.' So it just reinforces that sense of failure, which reinforces, 'actually nothing is good enough, so I may as well just kind of do what I wanna do,' and quite often that can manifest itself into serious violence." (P19)

In contrast, **when children have a consistent relationship with a trusted adult, this can provide a stabilising force** to help them feel secure despite turmoil in their lives. Consistent relationships were described by participants as providing an ongoing, stable

connection with a trusted, reliable and available adult, characterised by regular interaction, clear communication, and emotional investment. Both professionals and young people emphasised how having a reliable **key worker or mentor who can coordinate with other services can make a significant difference to a child's overall experience of the system of support**. In the context of children's trajectories through multiple services, these professionals can help children and their families navigate the system's complexity, and potentially increase the likelihood of services delivering a unified approach to addressing multiple needs.

Professionals also highlighted instances where effective coordination between a range of services led to positive outcomes. For example, when youth workers, social care professionals, mental health specialists, and educators **collaborate closely – with regular communication, shared goals, and a harmonised, integrated approach – to plan and deliver a coherent, purposeful, multi-faceted package of support, this can create a sense of continuity and hopefulness for the child**. There was a view that children and families who experience such integrated support can feel more trusting towards services, and more empowered to ask for the support they need. None of the young people we spoke with described such an experience, but they did advocate for more coordinated services to avoid falling through the gaps.

Broader contextual influences on children's identity development

While the focus of our report is on how services affect children's identity formation, it remains important to highlight that identity development is, of course, inherently dynamic and shaped by a much wider range of contextual factors, including (among others) family and peer relationships, community environments, socioeconomic conditions, and experiences of structural inequalities. These not only shape identity directly but also mediate how children experience and interpret their interactions with services. They were described by professionals and young people as playing a significant role in shaping children's identities, including their sense of self, their self-worth, their understanding of the world around them, their future aspirations and assessment of the opportunities and constraints they face, and their feelings of trust and safety.

- **Key relationships, particularly with family and peers:** participants noted that these key relationships deeply influence all aspects of children's identities. As the site of primary socialisation, families have a particularly profound influence on children's sense of self, understanding of the world, aspirations, feelings of trust and safety, and abilities to develop secure attachments.¹⁴

¹⁴ P01, P04, P08, P10, P12, P14, P15, P17, YP02, YP03, YP04.

- **Community contexts:** the community or neighbourhood in which a child is raised can shape children’s sense of self, as well as their understanding of the world around them and their perceptions of opportunities and constraints (P10, P14, P16, P18, YP group 3).
- **Life experiences:** early childhood and adolescent experiences, including adverse experiences such as violence, abuse, neglect and other forms of trauma, were viewed as critically shaping identity formation.¹⁵
- **Socioeconomic factors:** growing up in poverty or experiencing socioeconomic deprivation were viewed as shaping how children view their self-worth, their options, and their future, while also directly affecting access to opportunities.¹⁶
- **Intersectional characteristics:** children’s identity development is shaped by the intersecting influences of gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, and more. These characteristics – and society’s responses to them – can influence how children think about themselves, and how they experience and understand the world around them.¹⁷
- **Social norms and stereotypes:** the societal norms and narratives children encounter, particularly those tied to gender roles, masculinity/femininity, ethnicity, and neurodivergence often influence their self-perceptions and views of how they should be in the world.¹⁸
- **Structural inequalities:** the impact of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of exclusion and oppression is vital in shaping children’s sense of self and the world around them.¹⁹
- **Social media:** growing up in an era of constant digital exposure, children are increasingly influenced by social media, which can shape their self-image, their aspirations, and their interactions with peers and services.²⁰

Some professionals noted that **the ways in which children view and engage with services can, in turn, be influenced by these factors.**²¹ In particular, children’s attitudes towards some services may be shaped by socialisation and the influence of others’ attitudes within their communities or families. For example, some professionals noted that broader community attitudes towards the police, or parents’ attitudes towards social services, can shape children’s perceptions of those services regardless of their personal experiences and interactions with professionals, particularly if children feel expected to share a similar view.

¹⁵ P02, P08, P11, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2.

¹⁶ P01, P04, P05, P06, P10, P15, P17, P18, P20, YP03.

¹⁷ P03, P04, P05, P06, P08, P14, YP03, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

¹⁸ P03, P04, P05, P06, P08, P14, YP03, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

¹⁹ P03, P05, P08, P10, P15, P18, YP03, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

²⁰ P06, P08, P09, P10, P12, P20.

²¹ P08, P17, P20.

Professionals and young people also raised that **families can shape how influential services are for children's identity development**.²² For children in families that are unable to provide them with the support they need to develop a positive sense of self, including those who face dysfunction, neglect, or violence at home, the role of services in stepping in to support that development becomes crucial. Professionals and young people raised that, in these cases, services may represent an alternative source of help, care and guidance, from which children may seek (consciously or unconsciously) a sense of safety, recognition and positive regard. For vulnerable children who do not receive the support they need at home, then, services have a crucial role to play in filling that gap, countering negative influences on children's identities, and fostering a positive self-image, self-belief, self-efficacy, and resilience.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that, while services influence children's sense of self, understanding of the world, aspirations, and feelings of security and trust, their impact is deeply intertwined with broader social factors. This accords with the 'identities in practice' literature, suggesting that identity formation is not linear or deterministic, but a complex, ongoing process influenced by the interplay of multiple forces.

Nonetheless, perspectives shared by our participants highlight some of the mechanisms through which children's interactions with services shape the development of their identities. Our findings underscore the importance of the language services use to describe children, and the narratives that shape how services view and treat children. They also highlight the difference that relationships and ways of working with professionals can make. Services that adopt inclusive, strengths-based language, narratives and practice, while fostering trust, providing consistency, and empowering children to participate in decisions about their own support, were viewed by our participants as more likely to contribute to positive identity development. Conversely, fragmentation across the system of support, as well as approaches that conceptualise children themselves as problematic or focus too narrowly on challenges, risk reinforcing negative self-concepts and alienating children from sources of support.

Ultimately, our findings suggest a coordinated, holistic system of support, that acknowledges the complexity of children's lives, while valuing and scaffolding their strengths and aspirations, is key to fostering positive identity development. Ensuring that services work together, rather than in isolation, and that children feel heard, valued, and supported, may help shape identities that enable young people to thrive. We explore these and other ideas for how services and the system of support as a whole can influence identity development in ways that reduce vulnerability to violence, in Chapter 5.

²² P07, P12, P15, P19, YP03, YP04, YP group 3.

Chapter 2: What experiences, with which services, are most important in influencing children's identities?

Key messages:

- **Experiences with education:** Schools play a critical role in shaping children's sense of competence, self-worth, and future aspirations. School exclusions were described as often deeply damaging to children's sense of self, reinforcing feelings of rejection and disconnection from mainstream society.
- **Experiences with law enforcement services:** Repeated experiences of being treated as suspicious or dangerous can lead children to internalise these perceptions, reducing trust in authority and increasing engagement in risk-taking behaviours.
- **Experiences with Children's Social Care:** Consistent, supportive relationships with social workers can provide stability and foster positive identity development, but high staff turnover frequently disrupts this support. Young people highlighted the importance of social workers using strengths-based language in their practice.
- **Experiences of mental health services:** Barriers to accessing mental health support, including long waiting lists and high thresholds for care that result in children being turned away from services, can leave them feeling dismissed and unworthy of care.
- **Experiences with the youth work sector:** Youth work services were widely regarded as offering some of the most positive influences on identity. The ability of youth workers to build trusted relationships, recognise children's strengths, and provide opportunities for self-expression and personal growth was seen as particularly impactful.
- **Strengths-based approaches, meaningful involvement of children in service co-design, and early intervention:** These broader features of practice and systems can help children develop a positive sense of sense, foster agency and self-worth, and support resilience by keeping children engaged with support and addressing challenges before they escalate.

Introduction

Findings from this study suggest the mechanisms described above play out in various ways within different services. Participants offered a range of insights on the experiences that, in their view, hold most significance for children's identity formation. While we asked professionals and young people about the full range of services within the broader system of support for children, it was notable that they tended to highlight particular experiences with education, law enforcement, children's social care, youth work, and (from the young people's perspective) also mental health services, as having the greatest influence on children's identity development. This section highlights a range of experiences – both positive and negative – with these services, as well as a number of

broader experiences of the system of support, that our findings suggest can be transformative for children's identities.

Experiences with education

Professionals and young people emphasised a range of ways in which the education system plays a formative role in shaping young people's identities.²³ As a major site of socialisation, education settings play a significant role in shaping children's sense of themselves and the world around them.

Firstly, participants emphasised that **how children's achievements at school are framed by education professionals** can profoundly influence children's sense of self as successful or failing. This can, in turn, influence their motivation to engage with education, their understanding of their own potential, and their aspirations for the future. Young people reported feeling encouraged and motivated by teachers they had a good rapport with and who framed feedback in a strengths-based way (for example, 'you can achieve more than this'), but demotivated by feedback framed as failure.

Professionals noted that – operating in a context of stretched budgets, and particular curricular requirements and performance measures – not all schools are sufficiently resourced or appropriately set up to meet all children's needs, or to provide all children with opportunities to explore their diverse interests. They expressed the view that the school experiences of children who attain well in traditional academic subjects often support a sense of self as successful and a sense of their futures as promising. Both professionals and young people suggested, however, that school experiences may have a more negative impact on identity formation among those who do not achieve high attainment, including contributing to a sense of self as inadequate or failing, particularly if children's other achievements are not sufficiently recognised and valued.

Relatedly, professionals mentioned that the education system is struggling to provide **effective support for children who have special educational needs, including social, emotional and mental health needs**, which can profoundly impact identity development for these children. Children experiencing a lack of support for additional needs can leave them feeling unsupported, unable to succeed, and vulnerable. Conversely, where children with additional needs do feel supported, this can scaffold the development of a sense of security, safety, trust and self-worth.

Both professionals and young people also stressed that the interactions and relationships pupils have with teachers and other education professionals can have a significant influence on how accepted – and acceptable – children feel in non-violent contexts and

²³ P03, P04, P05, P06, P07, P08, P09, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P19, P20, YP03, YP group 1, YP group2, YP group 3.

groups. Reflecting concepts from labelling theory (outlined in the previous chapter), professionals noted that, when pupils are **labelled in school as ‘disruptive,’** they may internalise and come to associate with the label, which, in turn may reinforce cycles of behaviour. Similarly, young people noted that, if children feel they are **being grouped in with a crowd** and perceived and labelled accordingly, rather than being seen as an individual, they may come to associate with that group or label.

Participants highlighted that perceptions of **unsympathetic or excessively punitive responses to behaviours that stem from unmet need** may also function to heighten children’s sense of being misunderstood and undervalued, and undermine trust in the system of support.

Professionals described how the **experience of being excluded from schools** can have lasting effects on a child’s sense of self, including contributing to the internalization of negative self-concepts, and a sense of alienation from society or lack of belonging.²⁴ This was echoed in young people’s accounts. Perhaps because school is a universal institution and normatively understood as a fundamental part of growing up, school exclusion can feel especially significant to children. Participants described how children often interpret and feel school exclusion as a profound and meaningful form of rejection, which can undermine self-worth and a sense of belonging in the school community and beyond. Because school is often linked to future opportunities, participants noted, exclusion can also make children feel as though their paths are being closed off, reinforcing feelings of disconnection from wider society.

Conversely, where schools provide children with **trusted relationships with teachers, school-based mentors or counsellors**, this can represent an important source of support and security. Young people identified being particularly sensitive to how they felt they were perceived by school and teachers. They described trusted relationships with staff who made time for them, and made efforts to understand and affirm them, as a key influence on their identities.

These views suggest that provision of an **inclusive and supportive educational environment** that helps children identify and lean into their strengths, and build resilience to adversity, is important for the development of a positive sense of self, particularly for the most vulnerable children.

Experiences with criminal justice services

Professionals and young people highlighted that experiences with criminal justice services can have a weighty influence on various aspects of children’s identities. In

²⁴ P04, P05, P06, P07, P09, P11, P12, P15, P16, P17, P20.

particular, interactions with police were viewed by our participants as having a predominantly negative impact on children's identity development.²⁵

The young people we spoke with highlighted the impact of a **perceived lack of support from police, following exposure to experiencing violence**. They expressed that this absence of support affected their ability to trust the police, and led to feelings of anger and a sense of being let down. This, in turn, contributed to a loss of respect for the police as an authority.

Professionals and young people also described **police use of stop and search powers** as reinforcing an adversarial perception of the world among children, particularly in relation to authority. Professionals discussed how experiencing stop and search can create a sense among children that the very services intended to protect them instead pose a threat. Consequently, children – and particularly those from communities disproportionately targeted by these practices – may come to view the police not as protectors, but as adversaries, shaping their broader perceptions of authority in general and law enforcement in particular. For children who have experienced trauma, this perception of being under threat may also contribute to the development of a state of hypervigilance.

Over time, repeated experiences of **being viewed and treated as a potential criminal may lead to the internalization of criminalised identities**, reinforcing associations with offending behaviour and criminalised peers. Some professionals further noted that when children perceive police suspicion as unavoidable, regardless of their actions, refraining from offending may seem to offer little benefit, thus undermining motivation to comply with the law.

Some professionals expressed the view that, given their remit for law enforcement, many police officers are not provided with the training and development required to ensure consistent delivery of appropriate, relational work with children, and particularly with children who have experienced trauma or have special educational needs. The resulting skills gap can, it was thought, contribute to the **escalation of adverse, confrontational interactions**, and the entrenchment of children's distrust or opposition to authority.

Professionals also described the impact on children of being arrested or charged with a crime, and subsequently becoming formally involved with the youth justice system. Whilst arrest may act as a deterrent to crime for some children, professionals expressed the view that it is, usually, profoundly traumatic for children, and that the predominantly **punitive nature of justice systems** risks weakening children's feelings of belonging and self-worth, as well as their aspirations and attachment to mainstream society.

²⁵ P01, P03, P05, P06, P07, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20, YP01, YP02, YP group 1, YP group 3.

Additionally, the **language and labels often used to describe the identities of children within these systems, including the terms ‘young offender’ and ‘criminal’, or even ‘victim’**, were viewed by some professionals and young people as potentially significant in reinforcing socially stigmatised identities that make it harder for children to move beyond past behaviours. In particular, being labelled as an offender can, professionals thought, foster a sense of belonging within peer groups involved in co-offending.

Some professionals noted, however, that **some police forces and youth justice services are intentionally introducing more child-centred approaches** that, they felt, are more likely to have a positive influence on children’s identity development and other outcomes. Such approaches include prioritising triage and referrals to support services rather than punitive measures as a first resort, as well as adopting more inclusive language that, for example, refers to ‘children displaying behaviours of concern’ rather than ‘young offenders’. There was a view among some professionals that where these approaches have been implemented, they have contributed to a decline in serious offences and custodial sentences for children. This reflects evidence that where child-friendly, needs-led, diversion-focused processes have been adopted by youth justice services, there have been decreases in first-time entrants to the justice system and reoffending rates for children (Case and Browning, 2021). Similarly, in one group discussion a young person identified a positive experience of interaction with police, in which they really ‘got down to our level’.

“Like, there’s some good police officers. I’ve had a lot of experience with a police officer in my school before I left. She literally got down to our level, sat down with us, had a conversation with us, got to know us on the level where we could actually go [...] we felt comfortable to go with her if something happened.” (YP Group 1)

Experiences with Children’s Social Care

Professionals and young people discussed how experiences within Children’s Social Care influence identity formation, emphasising the role that social workers can play in providing children with relationships with trusted adults.²⁶

Young people’s accounts highlighted a range of negative experiences, such as **feeling treated like a number rather than an individual, encountering language that emphasised behaviours without providing context, experiencing inconsistent support or being passed between social workers, and lacking involvement in decisions affecting them**. These experiences were seen to negatively impact their identity formation, in ways described in the previous chapter. There was also a view from

²⁶ P18, P20, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 3.

young people that time in the care system led children to develop a sense of ‘resilience’ that, they felt, should not have been necessary at such a young age.

Young people also reported positive experiences of social work however, particularly when **continuity of care with a trusted adult** was maintained. Similarly, professionals highlighted the critical role of social workers in providing children who have experienced trauma in their family lives with a trusted and safe adult. However, they also noted that high staff turnover and reliance on temporary agency staff within children’s social care can undermine the development of these relationships. This instability may, they thought, contribute to feelings of abandonment and foster distrust towards support services.

Experiences of mental health services

Young people identified specific experiences with mental health services that they felt were detrimental to their sense of self.²⁷ They described **long waiting lists and high thresholds for care** resulting in their being turned away from services. This was experienced in terms of rejection and abandonment, which left them feeling unimportant, dismissed, and not taken seriously. This was particularly impactful because of the level of vulnerability they were experiencing at the time of asking for, or being signposted to, support.

While the young people we spoke with were aware of structural issues (predominantly resource limitations) underpinning these experiences, they felt the need to advocate for themselves or to act in extreme ways to be taken seriously enough, or to be viewed as ‘worthy enough’ to get help. There was a view that it would have helped to have been offered more transparent information about why they were not referred to mental health support, while several others identified the need for more opportunities to **receive alternative support while on waiting lists**.

Some young people discussed wanting more mental health and emotional support in schools, since this is where they spend much of their time, and a desire for support which considers needs tailored to particular year groups. They felt this would facilitate a sense of being cared for, beyond what grades they could achieve. Relatedly, some professionals emphasised the importance of locating **mental health services within community settings**, where children and young people can access them more easily. They described co-produced models integrating mental health support and youth work, delivered within community settings. In their view, these had been successful in engaging and supporting children and young people involved in violence, who might not have been reached by more traditional models of mental health support.

²⁷ YP01, YP03, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

Experiences with the youth work sector

Professionals emphasised the key role of the youth work sector in supporting the development of positive identities among children.²⁸ In particular, development of trusted relationships with skilled and well-resourced youth workers was seen as having a key influence on children's identities, including their sense of safety, self-worth and aspirations.

Youth workers were described by professionals as having a unique and particularly vital skill set for **developing trusted relationships with vulnerable children, through which they can identify needs and offer emotional support and guidance**, to help children develop feelings of safety and self-worth.

These professionals observed that youth workers not only often **serve as positive role models and mentors**, but can also **create safe spaces in which children have a degree of freedom** to explore and develop their sense of self. They play an important role in helping children **build aspirations** and see beyond their immediate circumstances to imagine alternative futures. By exposing them to different ideas about career paths, and providing opportunities to explore interests and skills through taking part in positive activities, youth work can help children envision a future they might not have considered.

Professionals highlighted that youth workers can provide a **safe, non-judgmental space where children can make mistakes**, learn from them, and build resilience. Offering consistent, empathetic support can allow children to develop coping strategies and emotional skills, while long-term relationships with youth workers can remind children that they are not defined by their mistakes, and reinforce their sense of self-worth and potential. For children who lack such support within their family or school's contexts, this was viewed as particularly transformative.

“Youth work meets the young people where they're at and sees the potential, and you can draw that out of the young people through all the interactions that you have. For a lot of young people, it's a safe space. A space to make mistakes and still be accepted.” (P03)

Further, some professionals noted that community-based youth work services that bring together children from diverse backgrounds, can also provide opportunities for peer interactions that challenge harmful stereotypes, and foster empathy. These spaces can, then, **support the development of social and emotional skills, as well as moral aspects of identity**, including identification with and attachment to values of tolerance and acceptance.

²⁸ P01, P03, P04, P05, P06, P10, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P19.

Strengths-based approaches, involvement of children in co-design, and early intervention

In addition to the service-specific experiences outlined above, when asked which experiences of services can have a particularly transformative influence on children's identities, participants outlined a range of broader facets of the system of support. Delivering strengths-based approaches, involving children in co-design, and intervening early were cited as having a potentially transformative effect on children's identities.

First, **strengths-based approaches that encourage children to focus on and build up their assets and aspirations**, rather than focusing primarily on their challenges, were viewed as enabling some children – sometimes for the first time – to reframe their own self-concepts in a positive light.²⁹ By emphasising children's virtues and potential, over their problems and obstacles, strengths-based approaches were said by these participants to help inspire resilience and encourage growth. Young people also advocated for approaches that highlight their positive attributes, use encouraging and positive language, and show genuine interest in their future plans and aspirations, viewing these as key ways for professionals to demonstrate a strengths-based perspective.

Second, professionals and young people described **children's involvement in co-designing services or interventions as potentially transformative** for their sense of agency and self-worth.³⁰ These participants emphasised the importance of involving children in the design and decision-making of services that impact their lives: by having their voices heard and seeing tangible changes as a result, children can be supported to view their contributions as valuable and important, and to develop a greater sense of ownership over their futures. For young people we spoke with, feeling involved and being offered space to express their thoughts and feelings helped them to feel they were being treated like a person and being seen.

Finally, professionals and young people discussed the importance of timing. **Holistic early intervention to meet needs before they escalate** can play a crucial role in bolstering positive identity formation from an early age.³¹ By addressing children's needs and difficulties before they worsen, early intervention can help children build resilience and develop the tools they need to navigate challenges.

²⁹ P01, P06, P08, P10, P16, P17, P18, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

³⁰ P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, YP04, YP group 3.

³¹ P02, P11, P12, P14, P16, YP04.

Conclusion

Findings from this study highlight the profound impact that experiences with education, law enforcement, Children's Social Care, mental health, and youth work services can have on children's identity formation. While each service plays a unique role, common themes emerged regarding the importance of support, recognition, and opportunities for positive self-concept development.

Education settings serve as key sites of socialisation, shaping children's sense of success, belonging, and self-worth. The framing of achievements, the availability of support for diverse needs, and the nature of interactions with teachers all influence whether children develop a sense of competence and aspiration, or experience a sense of failure and exclusion. Particularly for vulnerable children, inclusive and supportive educational environments are crucial in fostering resilience and positive identity formation. Experiences with law enforcement can exert a significant influence on identities, often shaping children's perceptions of authority and their sense of belonging in society. Stop-and-search practices and punitive justice approaches may reinforce negative self-concepts, feelings of alienation, and, in some cases, cycles of offending. However, in contrast to more traditional approaches, child-centred approaches to policing and youth justice were described as showing more promise in supporting positive outcomes for children. Youth work and social care services also emerged as influential sectors, that can offer trusted relationships, emotional support, and mentorship to help children build a sense of safety, self-worth, and future aspirations. Experiences of being turned away from mental health support were emphasised by several young people as adversely impacting their sense of self and self-worth.

Beyond service-specific experiences, broader features of practice and systems also shape identity development. Strengths-based models that emphasise children's potential, co-designed services that empower children to influence decisions, and early interventions that address challenges before they escalate may all contribute to fostering positive self-concepts and resilience.

Importantly, the findings also illustrate how systemic issues underlie and shape children's experiences across these services. Factors such as training, resources and capacity constraints affect each service within the system of support, which in turn affects how children experience that system. Tackling these systemic issues is essential for creating supportive, inclusive, and equitable services capable of fostering positive identity formation for all children.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that children's identities are most positively influenced when services recognise and nurture their strengths, provide support tailored to individual needs, and create environments in which they feel valued and empowered.

Chapter 3: How are children's experiences of services patterned according to their intersecting characteristics, and how does this influence children's identities?

Key messages:

- **Ethnicity:** Unconscious bias, stereotypes, prejudice, and structural factors contribute to disparities that particularly disadvantage Black children and those from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) backgrounds, including disproportionate school exclusion and criminalisation.
- **Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and neurodivergence:** Deficits in training and resources for working effectively with children with additional needs results in these children being misunderstood and mislabelled. A lack of skills for engaging effectively with neurodivergent children may contribute to escalation of conflicts.
- **Gender:** Gendered stereotypes and normative expectations influence the ways in which services respond to girls who have been involved in violence. There were particular concerns that gender norms may contribute to victim-blaming narratives, where responsibility for experiences of violence is wrongly shifted onto the child.
- **Socioeconomic background:** Children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience systemic neglect, harsher disciplinary measures, greater stigmatisation and lower expectations of success, all of which function to perpetuate wider inequalities.
- **Family reputation:** Children from families with a history of service involvement may be pre-judged, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage and limiting access to fair support.
- **Experience in care:** Looked-after children often face instability and disrupted relationships with services, making it harder to build trusting relationships and cultivate a positive sense of self. Children living in children's homes may also be subject to disproportionate criminalisation, for behaviour that in a typical family setting would be handled informally.
- **Intersectionality:** Service responses to children's intersecting characteristics produce complex and compounded patterns of disadvantage, underscoring the need for systemic and structural reform beyond individual service-level changes.
- **Impact on identities:** Children's experiences of bias, discrimination, and disproportionate treatment profoundly affect children's identity formation, intensifying feelings of unfairness, marginalisation, alienation, and diminished self-worth. Such experiences can lead to reduced trust in services, heightened hypervigilance, and feelings of powerlessness and exclusion, reinforcing negative cycles of identity development and marginalisation.

Introduction

There was a common view among participants that children's experiences of services are patterned according to specific characteristics.³² This reflects existing evidence of disproportionalities in, for example, education and criminal justice outcomes, patterned by factors including ethnicity, neurodivergence, and gender (see, for example, YEF, 2025; and DfE, 2019).

Most professionals focused, in particular, on how interactions and experiences differ by ethnicity and special education needs and disabilities (SEND) or neurodivergence, but some also discussed how gender, socioeconomic and family background, and experience of care can affect dynamics between children and services. Some professionals noted that progress was being made by services to deliver more equitable and fair support to children, but emphasised there was still progress left to be made.³³ Young people tended to focus on racialised experiences, neurodivergence, gender and care experience.

Ethnicity

Professionals and young people discussed ongoing differences in interactions with and experiences of services, as well as outcomes of support, between children of different ethnicities.³⁴ These participants highlighted particular concerns about the ways in which **unconscious bias, stereotypes, prejudice, and structural factors contribute to disparities** that disadvantage Black children and those from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) backgrounds.

“Especially being from like a brown person or like somebody from a minority ethnic group, your reactions are always ‘dramatic’. You're always known as the dramatic person, like, so dysregulated, so violent, aggressive. But, you know, no, I'm distressed. I've gone through a lot of traumatic things in my life. I'm responding accordingly to what I have gone through [...] and it does increase how aggressive a person can become because they're like, ‘you think I'm aggressive? I'll show you aggressive,’ but the thing is, they're struggling.” (*YP group 3*)

Some professionals felt that, overall, Black and GRT children are more likely to be **stereotyped within services as ‘aggressive’, ‘risky’, ‘dangerous’ or ‘criminal’ – and ‘harder to help’** – than their White peers, and that these perceptions influence children's

³² P01, P02, P03, P04, P05, P06, P08, P09, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, YP01, YP02, YP03, YO04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

³³ P14, P16.

³⁴ P01, P02, P03, P05, P06, P08, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P20, YP03, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

experiences of and outcomes within services. Young people agreed, and added further nuance. They reflected on experiences in which they felt stereotypes and discrimination linked to their race/ethnicity intersected with stereotypes associated with neurodivergence and gender, to shape how they were perceived, labelled, and supported by services. Young people discussed how these dynamics exacerbate and amplify the impact of labels such as ‘aggressive’, ‘attention seeking’, or ‘promiscuous’, reflecting Rosenfield’s (2012) insight that groups of young people that are disadvantaged across multiple axes of social status experience a ‘triple jeopardy’.

A key concern raised by some professionals was the **adultification of Black children**. Adultification happens when people and institutions make assumptions about, and place expectations on, children that are developmentally inappropriate. Davis and Marsh (2020) describe it as, ‘when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children’. Professionals suggested that adultification contributes to differential treatment in education and the criminal justice system, and that Black children’s experiences of adultification also intersect with gender. One professional noted, for example, that there may be greater expectation for Black girls to cope with trauma without adequate emotional or institutional support. Others discussed how assumptions of higher culpability among Black boys may result in harsher legal consequences and criminalisation by the justice system, and more punitive measures in the education system. These professionals discussed how White children in similar circumstances may be more likely to be viewed as victims of exploitation or as having other vulnerabilities that should be addressed through support.

Some young people similarly mentioned that they felt Black young people and those of minoritised ethnicities had to **self-advocate to a greater extent** than their White peers, due to their **behaviours or symptoms of distress being viewed through a stereotyped lens, and as such being ignored, taken less seriously or misconstrued**.

“I’ve been an appropriate adult for his friend who was Black and their experience to my brother’s experience was completely different. Within the criminal system they were never offered, the boy said to me that he was never offered a phone call to his parents and he overheard the officer saying, you know, ‘oh he probably doesn’t have anyone that cares about him’. But when it came to my brother, it was straight away like, is there anyone you want to call, your mum or dad? Just assuming that, you know, a White boy has their mum and dad in their in their life.”

(YP04)

While (as explored in the previous chapter) school exclusions, and stop and search practices, were viewed by professionals as having a particularly important impact on children’s sense of self and understanding of the world, professionals and young people

also highlighted that **disparities in rates of exclusion and stop and search**, patterned by ethnicity and gender, contribute significantly to the social marginalisation of Black boys.

Professionals also raised concerns about the degree of **workforce diversity and the levels of cultural competence and sensitivity within services**. They expressed the view that, where cultural competence and sensitivity is lacking, this can lead to miscommunication, bias, racial profiling and conflict escalation.

Special educational needs and disabilities and neurodivergence

Participants also discussed ways in which children's experiences of services, including education and law enforcement, can be shaped by whether they have SEND or are neurodivergent.³⁵

Professionals and young people noted that there is a considerable **lack of understanding about neurodiversity within key services**. There was a view that neurodivergent children and their behaviours are frequently misinterpreted as being defiant or disruptive rather than being understood in relation to their specific needs, which can result in inadequate or inappropriate responses from professionals. (For example, overcrowded and noisy classrooms may contribute to distress, anxiety and fear for some children, who may turn to disruptive behaviour as a strategy to cope with or escape these environments.) Overall, these participants noted the need to **strengthen training and professional development across services**, to enable professionals to provide effective support and care for neurodivergent children.

Participants expressed a concern that neurodivergent children, including those with conditions such as ADHD and autism, may be **labelled** as troublemakers, rather than being provided with support interventions, and that where needs are not addressed at an early stage, this may increase the likelihood of their involvement in the criminal justice system. A further concern was that police officers may lack the necessary communication skills to engage effectively with neurodivergent children, which may contribute to escalation of conflicts. Once neurodivergent children enter the youth justice system, similar challenges may persist, to the extent that there is a lack of understanding of children's conditions and how these affect their communication or behaviour, including their ability to cope and behave as expected in particular settings.

³⁵ P01, P02, P05, P06, P12, P16, P18, P20, YP group 3.

“Neurodiverse young people, in terms of their communication styles, if they respond in aggressive manner because they are triggered by something, or have a meltdown, it’s not seen as neurodiversity. It’s seen as they’re being aggressive, or they’re shouting, or they’re not listening, or they’re being defiant.” (P18)

Among the young people we spoke with, there was one view that when children’s neurodivergence is linked to their trusting and believing what others say, this can lead to them being particularly susceptible to labels and framing of language about them.

Some professionals expressed the view that mainstream educational institutions are predominantly designed to accommodate neurotypical children, and frequently lack the expertise and resources necessary to provide effective support for children with SEND. This can make it challenging for neurodivergent children, and particularly those who experience difficulties with focus or hyperactivity, to thrive in school. In cases where SEND or neurodivergence contribute to behavioural challenges, a lack of expertise and resources for managing this effectively may make measures such as removal from classrooms or exclusion from school more likely. Professionals noted that these responses not only limit children’s educational opportunities but may also exacerbates feelings of alienation and marginalisation within the school environment.

Gender

Fewer professionals discussed in detail how children’s experiences of services may be patterned by gender.³⁶ Most commonly, gender was cited in relation to its intersections with other characteristics, as explored below in the discussion regarding intersectionality. Nonetheless, professionals did mention two points concerning gender specifically. One professional raised the concern that, **to the extent that existing services were designed largely with boys in mind, they may be less equipped to identify and respond effectively to girls’ involvement in violence.**

“All the systems are very much set up for boys, when actually we know there’s an escalating pattern of female involvement in violence.” (P19)

Another professional discussed how gendered stereotypes and normative expectations influence the ways in which services respond to girls who have been involved in violence. This participant noted how **girls’ engagement in violence may be perceived as a significant deviation from gendered normative expectations.** While in some cases this may mean services are more inclined to view girls involved in violence as, for example, victims of exploitation, the participant cautioned that, when girls’ behaviours are

³⁶ P13, P19.

understood through the lens of norm violations, this may instead lead to intensified negative labelling and stigmatisation.

“When girls do commit serious acts of violence, then in a sense there’s even more negative labelling because it’s seen as outside of the norm, if you like. So in terms of how those girls are viewed, [negative perceptions are] compounded because that’s so completely out of kilter with what is expected of girls.” (P13)

Young people also reflected on how gendered stereotypes and normative expectations influence the labels and narratives used by services, and how this may influence how services respond to their exposure to violence.³⁷ Young people expressed particular concerns that **gender norms can contribute to victim-blaming narratives, where responsibility for experiences of violence is wrongly shifted onto the child**, which risks diminishing the seriousness of their experiences and influencing the adequacy of service responses.

“There’s this misconception that it [labelling] can maybe happen more to males than it does to females sometimes. And I think that is quite like far from the actual truth because they are different in the type of language used. [...] especially like young Black boys being called [unclear] like just because they’re standing up at the bus stop or like standing in a group. But then also when, like, a female sort of perspective, that ‘attention-seeking’ sort of language, that you’re being ‘promiscuous’ just because you’re acting a certain way or you are like – it’s also feeding into that language of ‘they were asking for it’.” (YP group 3)

These perspectives suggest that gendered stereotypes and normative expectations continue to shape how children are perceived, and how services respond to their needs.

Socioeconomic background

Professionals suggested that children’s experiences of services are deeply influenced by their socioeconomic background.³⁸ These participants reported that **children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience systemic neglect, harsher disciplinary measures, greater stigmatisation and lower expectations of success, all of which function to perpetuate wider inequalities.**

One professional noted, for example, that while middle-class children displaying challenging behaviour may be labelled as ‘petulant’ or simply ‘having a bad day,’

³⁷ YP group 3.

³⁸ P01, P03, P04, P09, P10, P13, P14, P16, P18.

working-class children exhibiting the same behaviours may be more likely to be seen as 'aggressive' or 'problematic'. Others described how children from disadvantaged communities may feel ignored by public services. When children feel their local area as a whole is neglected, this can reinforce feelings of abandonment and hopelessness. The perception of a lack of investment in their communities may also contribute to a sense that their needs and voices are unimportant, further discouraging engagement with services.

Family reputation

Some professionals noted that the reputation of a child's family can significantly shape their experiences with services.³⁹ These professionals reported that children with parents or older siblings who have had prior involvement with the police or social services may experience bias within those services, being **viewed through the lens of their family's reputation rather than their personal actions**. For example, one professional described a child whose father had a criminal history and who, the professional felt, was treated by police as a future offender rather than an individual in their own right. Another described seeing schools impose harsher than average disciplinary measures on children from certain families. Such prejudicial treatment can, it was thought, push children towards the very negative behaviours they are expected to display, limiting opportunities for support and reinforcing cycles of disadvantage.

"I've worked with young people who are from a particular family [...] and get offered less support. [...] They might have their own personality, need for help and support [but...] they're known as being one of that family, and I don't think they get a fair deal because it's almost like it's expected of them just to do what the family have done." (P10)

Experience in care

Participants described how children in care face unique challenges that shape their interactions with services.⁴⁰ Professionals highlighted a particular concern about **criminalisation of behaviour that, in a typical family setting, would be handled informally**. One professional described an example where a child living in a children's home broke something in the home, which led staff to call the police rather than managing the situation themselves, which led in turn to the child receiving a criminal record that, it was thought, could have been avoided.

³⁹ P10, P20.

⁴⁰ P18, P20, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

“If that child was in their home, the likelihood of their parent or carer picking up the phone and calling the police, it’s very, very slim. So why are we treating these children differently to those that are still living at home?” (P20)

Professionals and some young people highlighted that **gaps in skills among professionals working in children’s homes** for delivering trauma-informed care and for managing challenging behaviour may place children in care at a higher risk of entering the criminal justice system.

Professionals also reported that children in care often experience profound identity challenges. Being removed from their communities without sufficient regard for cultural and social needs can leave children feeling disconnected from their roots. Frequent changes in social workers further disrupt their sense of continuity, undermining the ability to maintain stable relationships with adults who understand their histories. Prioritising identity work, through consistent documentation and cultural connection, was seen as crucial for ensuring that children in care develop a positive sense of self.

Young people identified examples of very positive relationships with particular social workers with whom they had built a trusted relationship, characterised by consistency, taking time to be interested in the young person, giving them space to talk openly and be listened to, taking an interest in their future, using validating and affirming language, and warmth. Like other trusted relationships, these were cited as positively influencing identity development.

Intersectionality

While each of these factors may affect children’s experiences, participants emphasised that they do not operate in isolation.⁴¹ Instead, **characteristics such as ethnicity, neurodivergence, gender, and socioeconomic background intersect with each other, resulting in complex dynamics and, at times, compounding the challenges children face.** For example, some professionals noted that Black boys with SEND from low-income backgrounds encounter multiple layers of disadvantage, facing higher rates of stop and search, criminalisation, and exclusion from school. Similarly, young people identified examples of experiences of ‘triple jeopardy’, where labels and stereotypes linked to multiple axes of social status intersected to influence how, in their view, services perceived and treated them.

“I think people forget how important intersectionality is. It affects every single part of your life.” (YP group 1)

⁴¹ P04, P08, P15, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

Overall, both professionals and young people stressed that understanding children's experiences requires an intersectional approach that acknowledges how a range of factors interact to pattern children's interactions and outcomes. Without this, services risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Some professionals also expressed the view that effectively addressing disparities within services cannot be addressed solely through service-level reform. They emphasised that these **disparities are rooted in broader structural inequalities** (including systemic racism, socioeconomic inequalities, and widespread stereotypes and biases), which shape how institutions operate and make decisions. Without confronting this structural context, efforts to ensure services deliver equitable and inclusive support will be inherently constrained.

Impact on identities

Participants discussed the impact of these different patterns of experiences on children's identity development. In the previous chapter, we discussed how experiences of services can influence children's sense of self and self-worth, their understanding of the world around them, their aspirations and perceptions of opportunities and constraints, and their feelings of safety and trust, as well as their feelings towards services and authorities. In addition to shaping how those dynamics play out, intersecting experiences of bias, discrimination and disproportionate treatment can have further consequences for identity formation.⁴²

Professionals noted that children often have a strong sense of fairness and justice, and recognise inequitable treatment when they receive it, even if they have not yet developed all the language they need to name and fully describe it. Both professionals and young people noted that experiencing bias, exclusion, or over-policing can contribute to a **sense of unfairness and maltreatment, which negatively affects mental health, self-worth and feelings of belonging and agency**. To the extent that the **stress of discrimination exacerbates existing mental health struggles**, this can make it harder for children to navigate daily life. Children who feel unfairly treated by services may **lose trust and avoid seeking help** even when they are in danger and need protection. Some participants noted that experiences of discrimination can also heighten feelings of **hypervigilance** and constant caution about others' perceptions, which **undermines feelings of trust and safety**. Children's recognition that they are viewed or treated differently from others, and the accompanying sense of being unable to secure equitable treatment, may also contribute to **feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, alienation and disenfranchisement, which in turn exacerbate cycles of marginalisation**. Finally, a lack of representation in services, and/or cultural insensitive

⁴² P03, P05, P10, P15, P16, YP01, YP02, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

treatment, can create feelings of **alienation** among children, leading them to feel out of place and unsupported.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined participants' perspectives on the complex and interconnected ways in which children's experiences of services are patterned by characteristics such as ethnicity, neurodivergence, gender, socioeconomic background, family context, and care experience. The findings highlight that disproportionalities in children's experiences of services are influenced by broader social biases, stereotypes, and structural inequalities, with significant consequences for children's identities, including their self-worth and trust in institutions. Young people's perspectives testify to the ongoing impact of bias based on multiple intersecting discriminatory stereotypes.

While acknowledging the complexity of these dynamics, some young people and professionals expressed concern that patterned experiences (of exclusion, mislabelling, or inadequate support, for example) influence vulnerability to involvement in violence. Understanding these intersecting patterns therefore provides a critical foundation for the exploration of mechanisms linking identity-forming experiences of services with children's engagement in violence, which we discuss in the next chapter.

The perspectives of our participants suggest that, while some progress has been made in fostering more equitable service delivery, significant challenges remain. Professionals identified important areas for development, including enhancing cultural competence, improving understanding of neurodivergence, and ensuring more consistent and trauma-informed responses for children in care.

The findings also suggest, however, that addressing disproportionalities in service experiences cannot rely solely on reforming service-level practices. While efforts to embed and sustain equitable and inclusive practice are important, their efficacy depends on complementary action to address the broader structural inequalities that shape institutional practices. Without this wider lens, efforts to create equitable services risk being limited in scope and impact. The implication of these findings is that bringing about a fully equitable system of support requires a comprehensive approach, which recognises the multifaceted nature of disproportionality and seeks to address both service-level inequities and the structural conditions that help to perpetuate them. Aligning service-level efforts with macro-level strategies may help to enable meaningful, sustained progress towards fairness and equity in children's experiences of services.

Chapter 4: How do identity-forming experiences of services in turn influence children's involvement in violence?

Key messages:

- **Violence as a self-fulfilling prophecy:** Children who are repeatedly labelled as 'risky' or as 'perpetrators' may internalise these identities, leading them to adopt behaviours – including violent behaviours – that align with how they are perceived.
- **Violence arising from the search for belonging:** Exclusion from mainstream institutions can push children towards peer groups involved in violence, that offer them a sense of belonging and status.
- **Violence as a response to hopelessness:** If services do not nurture children's aspirations or provide pathways for a better future, disillusionment with mainstream society can drive them toward alternatives that appear to offer more promise or hope.
- **Violence as an attempt to achieve self-protection and safety:** When children feel under threat within their communities but do not trust the authorities to keep them safe, it can seem rational to turn to violence as a means of self-defence.
- **Violence arising from hypervigilance:** Relatedly, children who feel unsafe, and distrust the services that are there to keep them safe, may develop a heightened sense of threat, leading to reactive aggression.
- **Violence as a tactic to retain support:** In some cases, children may engage in violence as a way to maintain service attention and access to support they would otherwise not be given.
- **Violence as a means of self-expression:** When other forms of recognition and affirmation are (or feel) unavailable to children, violence can become a way for children to assert their identity and agency.
- **Protection against and resilience to violence:** By contrast, services that provide trusted adults to children can foster a sense of safety, recognition, and self-worth, offering a space for children to disclose risks, process emotions, and critically reflect on alternatives to violence. By building strengths, aspirations, and a sense of belonging, this can help children navigate challenges and build resilience to violence.

Introduction

Previous chapters in this report have outlined findings from our consultations with professionals and young people on how children's interactions with services shape their identities. In this chapter, we explore perceptions of how these identity-forming experiences in turn influence children's involvement in violence.

Before examining these perspectives, it is important to note that while participants largely agreed that identity plays a crucial role in shaping children's involvement in violence, they

also emphasised that it is just one part of a broader picture. Professionals highlighted other significant drivers of violence, such as force, coercion, threat, exploitation, and manipulation, which may have little to do with a child's sense of self.⁴³

Nonetheless, our participants identified several ways in which identity-forming experiences of services can influence children's engagement in, or protection against, violence. Below, we outline key themes exploring how self-fulfilling prophecies, exclusion, hopelessness, and a lack of trust and safety can shape children's engagement with violence. We also examine how positive, identity-affirming experiences can serve as protective factors.

Violence as a self-fulfilling prophecy

Participants' perspectives support the theory that **negative labels can become self-fulfilling prophecies**.⁴⁴ When children are labelled, stigmatised, or criminalised by services, these imposed identities can become internalised, leading them to adopt behaviours – including violent behaviours – that align with how they are perceived.

Professionals detailed how some children they had worked with saw this as the path of least resistance, believing there was **little point in acting against expectations when positive behaviour was neither recognised nor rewarded**.

“For children, in terms of that sense of identity they get from services, it's very hard for them to shift that identity, especially if it's negative one, and they almost get to a point where it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy of:

‘Wow, that's how they see me, so I might as well behave like that.’” (P20)

Young people reported that they were particularly susceptible to the impact of labelling at a young age, at a time when they may be ‘trying on’ different identities, and when the perceptions of others have a stronger impact on sense of self. Several young people suggested that this labelling can influence who they relate to and get involved with, in ways that make them more likely to be involved in violence. As an example, one young person said that being labelled as a failure at school left them ‘open to being groomed by others’ who had been hurt themselves and with whom the young person then related to on that basis.

“When you see people as a risk, that's when the risk rolls.” (YP group 3)

Violence arising from the search for belonging and mattering

Another key theme from consultation with professionals and young people was that **children's need for a sense of belonging and of mattering can drive them toward peer groups that use violence, particularly when they feel rejected, undervalued, or**

⁴³ P01, P03, P05, P09, P11, P14.

⁴⁴ P04, P05, P08, P10, P11, P12, P16, P19, P20, YP group 3.

misrecognised in spaces governed by non-violent social norms.⁴⁵ Professionals described how essential belonging is during adolescence, providing a reassuring sense of safety and recognition. When this need goes unmet in normatively non-violent environments – such as school or non-violent peer groups – children may become more vulnerable to becoming involved in groups that use violence, as they seek acceptance and status.

Young people reported that if trust in services was lacking or broken, or if they felt let down and unsupported, then they would look for trust, support and validation from elsewhere. They discussed how they may find a sense of belonging and mattering among others who have ‘also been hurt’, or ‘the wrong crowd’, or change themselves to fit the label/group into which they have been put by others.

Additionally, some professionals noted that children who do not feel a sense of belonging, or a sense that they matter, within specific environments, such as in school or psychological support services, may resort to violence as a means of prompting their removal from those settings.

Violence as a response to hopelessness

Some participants also discussed how a sense of hopelessness can emerge when children perceive a lack of opportunities or struggle to envision positive change in their lives.⁴⁶

Professionals highlighted that if services fail to nurture children’s aspirations or provide pathways for a better future, **disillusionment with mainstream society can drive them toward alternatives** that appear to offer more promise in some way. This view was also raised among young people. A sense of disillusionment can, then, make children vulnerable to being drawn into peer groups that engage in violence when they perceive these groups as offering a more appealing future. If children see no viable routes for upward mobility, or have low self-esteem and little belief they can strive for a better future, they may rationalise that they have ‘nothing to lose’, leading to increased vulnerability to groups that use violence.

Some young people also mentioned hopelessness resulting from experiencing a lack of or inconsistent support, or being passed between services with no transitional support, leading to frustration that might in turn be discharged through violence.

Violence as an attempt to achieve self-protection and safety

Another key theme was the use of violence as a means of self-protection. Participants highlighted that when children feel unsafe and distrust societal systems – including law

⁴⁵ P01, P03, P04, P06, P07, P09, P10, P11, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, YP01, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 3.

⁴⁶ P05, P06, P09, P16, P19, YP03, YP group 3.

enforcement and safeguarding services – they may turn to **violence as a way to protect themselves** and feel (subjectively) safer.⁴⁷

“I think that’s why I, like a lot of young people, are exposed to violence. Like when you think Black people carrying knives, a lot of the time it’s not because they want to hurt anyone. It’s because they want to protect themselves because they don’t feel protected. And it’s not just from the police. It’s kind of like life in general. You know, like a lot of them are like left alone for their own devices. So, you know, the smart thing for them is to protect themselves.” (YP04)

For example, a young person who had been labelled a ‘snitch’ by peers in the past, suggested that this put them at greater risk, so involvement in violence was a protection against this label. Others emphasised that when young people feel that law enforcement will not protect them, they are more inclined to take things into their own hands, and less likely to report situations or behaviours related to violence.

“I’d definitely take things into my own hands, and I definitely will not have that fear now because it’s, you know, sort of, I know with myself, nothing is going to be done. So it’s like you have to sort of deal with things yourself.” (YP01)

Ultimately, **when children feel under threat within their communities but do not trust the authorities to keep them safe, it can seem rational to develop a reputation for violence as a deterrent** – to become the threat, rather than continuing to feel threatened. This aligns with survey data from YEF, which found that teenage children who carried a weapon (most of whom had used a weapon to threaten or harm someone) were more likely than others to have previously been victims of violence themselves (Popham, 2024). While carrying a weapon in fact carries significant risks, those who did were also more likely to report feeling safe in places where others felt unsafe, such as youth clubs, public transport, and public parks.

“Identity can be reinforced in either a positive way or a negative way, and if it continues to be reinforced in a negative way, then they are the children that [see the world as] a scary place, and people are not to be trusted. And part of a response to being fearful can be that fight or flight – that fight, really, where if the world’s a scary place, I need to protect myself. So I need to do things like, you know, carry a weapon or hit first before somebody hits me. Violence just doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It comes from the development of identity and how the child views the world and the environment which they’re growing up in.” (P13)

⁴⁷ P05, P07, P10, P12, P14, YP01, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 3.

Violence arising from hypervigilance

Relatedly, as discussed earlier in this report, professionals discussed how feeling a lack of safety, and distrust in the services that are there to keep them safe, can lead children – and particularly those who have experienced trauma – to feel a constant sense of threat and stress that leads to a state of hypervigilance.⁴⁸ This **heightened and continual state of alertness can make everyday situations appear as potential threats, which in turn motivates defensive behaviour**, which can include violence.

“I understand violence as a kind of response to distress and response to threat. I take a public health approach to violence, not a criminalised approach to violence. So for me, any sense of feeling unsafe in the world is going to put you into fight or flight mode and increase the likelihood of those behaviours becoming activated.” (P01)

Violence as a tactic to retain support

Our findings also highlight another dynamic through which children seeking protection can turn to violence – the dynamic of **violence as pragmatic, tactical help-seeking**. One professional described cases in which children who not only drew a sense of safety and security from services or interventions, but had also developed reliance on them and had been fearful of the interventions or service support coming to an end, had engaged in violence in order to remain eligible for support.⁴⁹ Some young people also mentioned the use of tactical harmful behaviour to gain support for mental health needs, though the examples they gave referred to self-harm rather than violence towards others.

Violence as a means of self-expression

Finally, professionals discussed how for some children, violence can serve as a form of self-expression.⁵⁰ When children feel they do not belong in mainstream society, or feel abandoned, rejected, unnoticed, unrecognised, or undervalued, violence can become a **tool to cope with these feelings and, subjectively, a means of asserting presence and power, or gaining recognition or status**. Young people also identified this as a mechanism, referring in particular to the use of violence as a way to vent feelings of anger and frustration at feeling let down or unsupported by their contacts with services.⁵¹

Protection against and resilience to violence

By contrast, participants also discussed how identity-forming experiences can provide protection against and resilience to violence. In particular, when young people develop

⁴⁸ P01, P06.

⁴⁹ P15.

⁵⁰ P05, P13, P17.

⁵¹ YP group 3.

trusted relationships with a safe adult (such as a youth worker, mentor, teacher, or other trusted professional), that instil a sense of safety, recognition and self-worth within the context of that relationship, this can help protect them from violence in a number of ways.⁵²

Perhaps most obviously, it provides them within **someone to whom they feel they can disclose risks and harms, or who is well placed to notice risks**, which in turn helps systems of support identify and respond to those risks and harms.

Creating spaces for children to discuss their experiences, whether related to violence, discrimination, or personal struggles, can also help children **work through, make sense of and reflect on their emotional, psychological and behavioural responses**. This, in turn, opens up opportunities for trusted adults to encourage children's critical reflections on any motivations towards violence – including identifying, questioning and assessing current motivations and plausible alternatives, and to support reconfiguration of their responses.

Trusted relationships and positive activities that provide children with a **safe space to explore and foster their strengths and interests** may also encourage them to see beyond any labels that may have been imposed on them, explore different aspects of their identity, expand their world view, and develop self-worth and aspirations. This can support children to develop and reinforce a view of themselves as belonging and successful in spaces governed by non- or anti-violent norms, that in turn motivates acting in accordance with those norms. Activities that **cultivate social and emotional skills** can also directly equip children with the ability – and belief in their ability – to regulate their own emotional and behavioural responses, and manage and dispel conflict.

Finally, young people identified ways in which **trusted adults advocated for them or were able to provide advice** about how to support or navigate difficulties they were facing in alternative ways.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored participants' perspectives on how identity-forming experiences of services can influence children's engagement in violence, highlighting key dynamics relating to self-fulfilling prophecies, and how unmet needs for belonging, hope, safety, and support can motivate involvement in violence. The views explored here suggest that interactions with services that leave children feeling negatively labelled, excluded, or distrustful can increase vulnerability to engaging in violent behaviours. Conversely, positive identity-affirming experiences, particularly those fostered through trusted relationships and supportive environments, can serve as protective factors, providing children with safety nets, fostering resilience, and clearing alternative pathways away from violence.

⁵² P03, P04, P06, P07, P16, P17, P18, P19.

The findings underscore the importance of ensuring that services engage with children in a way that fosters recognition, belonging, and hope. Services should aim to empower children by acknowledging their strengths, providing opportunities to develop agency, and helping them envision a positive future. By prioritising positive identity-affirming support structures, policymakers and practitioners can play a critical role in reducing children's vulnerability to violence and promoting safer, more inclusive communities. The next chapter explores in greater detail a range of suggestions from our participants about what services can do to prevent violence.

Chapter 5: What can services do that may influence children's identity development in ways that contribute to reduced involvement in violence?

Key messages:

- **Build trusted relationships:** Consistent, long-term relationships with trusted professionals can help children feel valued and listened to, and demonstrate that there is a dependable adult to which they can turn for support.
- **Identify and nurture strengths:** Strengths-based approaches that recognise and build children's potential (rather than focusing solely on risks and problems) can help to foster self-worth and aspiration.
- **Provide children with new opportunities that help build aspirations and social and emotional skills:** Exposure to positive activities and mentorship can reinforce positive self-concepts, broaden children's horizons, and cultivate social and emotional skills that help support resilience to violence.
- **Ensure services are inclusive, accessible, and flexible:** Removing barriers to engagement would help to ensure that all children feel valued and supported, regardless of background.
- **Balance early intervention with responsive support:** Preventative work is needed to address problems before they escalate, and help children navigate challenges and build positive futures.
- **Provide long-term support where needed, and carefully prepare for transitions and endings:** Some children need longer term, consistent support to flourish. Smooth transitions between services and well-managed intervention endings can help to minimise feelings of rejection and instability.
- **Include families and communities:** Engaging families and community networks can help to strengthen children's wider support systems, and reinforce a sense of belonging and security.
- **Ensure staff have comprehensive skills, training, and support within a service environment that is conducive to good practice:** Highly trained practitioners are better equipped to build trust and offer meaningful support, but they need manageable caseloads and supportive leadership to embed and sustain good practice.
- **Strengthen collaboration between services:** Integrated, multi-agency working can help to provide coordinated support to address multiple needs, and to prevent children from falling through gaps in the system. This needs to be supported by clearer frameworks for inter-agency collaboration, better communication mechanisms, and greater alignment around a shared mission.
- **Involve children in meaningful co-design and co-production of services:** Giving children a meaningful voice in shaping services can help to foster a sense of agency and ensure support feels relevant and engaging to children. Co-design must be approached carefully to align expectations, avoid tokenism, ensure diversity of representation, and lead to tangible outcomes.

- **Improve funding and resources:** Adequate resourcing is essential to sustain high-quality support that meets children’s needs effectively, and to provide services with capacity for strategic improvement.
- **Address systemic biases:** Tackling societal prejudices and systemic inequalities within services and wider society is critical to ensuring fair, effective support that fosters positive identity development.

Introduction

Professionals and young people provided a range of insights on how services can influence children’s identity development in ways that contribute to reduced involvement in violence. Our findings suggest a spectrum of practice-oriented and more system-level changes could enhance the effectiveness of support for vulnerable children. Below, we set out a range of insights drawing on what our participants thought would help, including: building trusted relationships, identifying and nurturing strengths, providing children with opportunities to build aspirations and social and emotional skills, ensuring services are inclusive and flexible, balancing early intervention with responsive support, providing long terms support where needed, carefully preparing for transitions and endings, including families and communities, ensure staff have comprehensive training and support, strengthening collaboration between services, involving children in meaningful co-production, improving funding and resources, and addressing systemic biases.

Build trusted relationships

Our study provides further evidence to support the position that the system of support should prioritise ensuring that children are able to build trusted relationships. Several participants expressed the view that **strong, meaningful relationships with a trusted adult (or adults)** are not only important in supporting positive identity formation, but also play a direct role in preventing or reducing children’s involvement in violence.⁵³ This reflects existing evidence that relationships with trusted adults, including, for example, mentors and key workers, can help protect children from involvement in violence (YEF, 2022; Crest Advisory, 2025).

Participants emphasised that **consistent and long-lasting relationships** can be particularly beneficial for children who may have experienced instability, abandonment, or trauma. They suggested that trusted, caring relationships can help children feel listened

⁵³ P01, P04, P05, P06, P07, P08, P09, P11, P14, P16, P17, P18, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

to and recognised, as well as improving feelings of safety by demonstrating there is a dependable adult to which they can turn.⁵⁴

Participants discussed the potential value of a model in which children engaging with multiple services have a **single key worker they can trust, who communicates and coordinates with other services on their behalf**.⁵⁵ It was suggested that this approach might help ensure consistency in support and improve children's sense of security when navigating a range of different services.

Some professionals and young people highlighted concerns that high staff turnover can disrupt relationships and limit the effectiveness of support, suggesting the need to **promote stable workforces, and carefully plan and prepare for changes in personnel** conducting direct work with children.⁵⁶

Identify and nurture strengths

Our findings suggest that **strengths-based approaches may help to support positive identity development in children**. Professionals and young people emphasised the importance of identifying and nurturing children's strengths, alongside providing support that addresses problems.⁵⁷ As outlined in Chapter 1, when services (understandably) focus on solving the problems a child faces, this can overlook a richer narrative about the child; one which includes aspects of their identity and life that are more positive and could be strengthened or leveraged to help bolster their resilience and wellbeing.

Participants noted the importance of **highlighting and nurturing skills, talents and interests, and providing positive and enriching experiences or activities to children**. As part of this, they emphasised that the language used in interactions with, and discussion and written reports about children and referrals, should emphasise strengths and assets, and avoid negative labels and terminology. One professional described, in positive terms, how their service had shifted from using more negative framing around children, such as 'at risk of gang involvement' or 'children who perpetrate violence', to more positive descriptions that emphasise resilience in the face of trauma, a sentiment that was also identified as very important among young people.⁵⁸

Participants discussed how strengths-based approaches can foster a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, enabling children to feel valued and capable, while counteracting feelings of hopelessness, and providing an alternative to violence as a means of gaining recognition. As one professional highlighted, 'seeing young people as individuals and

⁵⁴ P01, P05, P06, P09, P11, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20, YP03, YP04, YP group 1, YP group 2, YP group 3.

⁵⁵ P05, P07, P08, P11, YP group 3.

⁵⁶ P15, YP04.

⁵⁷ P01, P06, P08, P10, P16, P17, P18, YP03, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

⁵⁸ P10, YP03, YP group 2, YP group 3.

making space for all the parts of them can be really transformative'.⁵⁹ This very much reflects the importance that the young people we spoke with placed on being treated like a whole person and an individual, rather than a label.

Provide children with new opportunities that help build aspirations and social and emotional skills

Our findings suggest that providing children with exposure to **different opportunities and life experiences** may support aspects of positive identity formation. As discussed earlier in this report, participants described how some vulnerable children can feel disconnected or devalued within the systems designed to support them. For example, the education system was perceived by some professionals as being structured around traditional academic pathways, which may not align with the strengths or aspirations of all children. Some professionals suggested that introducing children to alternative education options and career pathways (such as apprenticeships and trades), different environments beyond their local area, or opportunities that reflect their interests could help broaden their sense of possibility and support development of their aspirations.⁶⁰ Similarly, some professionals referred to **social prescribing** as a potential approach that may help children engage with positive activities, build connections, and develop social and emotional skills.^{61 62}

Some professionals also expressed the view that **fostering children's relationships across different cultures and groups** can encourage a sense of agency and connection to their communities, as well as fostering a more tolerant and accepting outlook.⁶³ **Youth clubs and other community provisions** were described as spaces that could provide opportunities for belonging, while broadening children's understanding of the world around them by exposing them to ideas, activities and people they may not have otherwise encountered. Evidence from the YEF (2021) demonstrates that children who develop social and emotional skills are less likely to become involved in violence. To the extent that social prescribing helps to achieve this, it may support both positive identity development and violence reduction.

⁵⁹ P01.

⁶⁰ P03, P04, P05, P12, P14, P15, P16, P20.

⁶¹ Social prescribing involves helping people to improve their health and wellbeing by connecting them to community services and activities, such as physical activities, arts/cultural activities, nature-based activities, or practical advice and support services.

⁶² P03, P14, P15, P20.

⁶³ P03, P14, P15, P20.

Ensure services are inclusive, accessible and flexible

Our findings suggest that improvements to service accessibility and inclusivity, to ensure they are welcoming and responsive to the realities of children's lives, could have positive effects for children's identity development, as well as improving service engagement.

Several participants highlighted that current service structures can be rigid and may not accommodate the complex circumstances of children who have experienced instability or trauma. Non-attendance or non-engagement with some services may result in withdrawal of support (for example, in the case of children's mental health services), or sanctions (for example, in the case of youth justice services, or education settings), which can leave children feeling excluded, ignored, undervalued, or unworthy of support.

Participants suggested that a more **flexible, child-centred approach that seeks to understand and address reasons for non-attendance or non-engagement** could help improve engagement and support children's sense of self-worth.⁶⁴

Some professionals noted that children may be deterred from engaging with services if they perceive them as judgmental, unwelcoming, or reminiscent of previous negative experiences. To counter this, professionals suggested that services should prioritise making their **spaces physically and emotionally inviting**, for example by fostering warm and non-clinical atmospheres, ensuring staff are approachable, and actively working to reduce stigma associated with seeking support. They reflected on the importance of creating welcoming services environments where children feel comfortable, valued, and respected.⁶⁵

In addition, some professionals suggested that services could do more to 'meet children where they are at' – both emotionally and physically. Rather than requiring children to attend formal service locations, professionals could **deliver more support in community spaces** that children already access. These professionals suggested that this approach could make services feel less intimidating and more relevant to children's lives.⁶⁶

Overall, while professionals recognised the challenges involved in adapting service models, there was a sense that greater flexibility was needed to tailor service provision for the most vulnerable children, to ensure they can feel valued and worthy of support, develop trust in professionals and services, and willingly seek help when needed.

⁶⁴ P02, P03, P05, P06, P07, P10, P13, P15, P19, YP04, YP group 3.

⁶⁵ P01, P03, P04, P05, P08, P09, P11.

⁶⁶ P03, P05.

Balance early intervention with responsive support

Our findings suggest that, while many early intervention services are facing acute financial pressures, there is a need to ensure the system of support strikes the right balance between prevention and response.

Several participants shared their views on the benefits of **strengthening preventative approaches that proactively identify and address risks early**, and provide support to children before patterns of involvement in violence become more established.⁶⁷ A more preventative approach, if delivered in a way that is sensitive and responsive to children's needs, could help foster a more positive sense of self and future aspirations. For example, accessible mental health support in schools was seen by young people we spoke with as a way to equip children with coping strategies before they reach crisis points, potentially reducing the likelihood of negative identity formation linked to exclusion or disengagement. Relatedly, some professionals reflected on the value of **diversionary approaches to policing**, which prioritise referrals to youth services and other forms of support over immediate enforcement measures. They suggested that such an approach could help children feel supported rather than criminalised, reinforcing a sense of belonging, self-worth and hopefulness.

However, professional participants also acknowledged the need for caution in early intervention efforts. They emphasised that interventions must be **carefully designed to avoid stigmatising children or making premature assumptions about their future behaviour**. There is a delicate balance between offering support at the right time and ensuring that children are not labelled in ways that limit their opportunities. These perspectives highlight the importance of designing preventative approaches that are constructive, proportionate, and that genuinely help children develop confidence in their potential and future pathways.

Provide long-term support where needed, and carefully prepare for transitions and endings

Our findings suggest that supporting positive identity development can take time, and as such short-term interventions may be insufficient for fostering meaningful and lasting improvements to children's sense of self and related outcomes. Identity development is a constant, ongoing process. Particularly for children who have experienced instability, adversity, or exclusion, developing a positive sense of self may require **sustained engagement and flexible support over a prolonged period**, rather than time-limited interventions with fixed expectations for progress. Several participants emphasised the

⁶⁷ P04, P05, P07, P11, P12, P13, P17, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

value of open-ended or longer-term support models that allow for ongoing engagement without abrupt cut-off points.⁶⁸

Where services do not offer ongoing, open-ended engagement, **service transitions and endings need careful planning and preparation** to avoid negative effects on children's sense of self.⁶⁹ Professionals noted that children who have formed trusting relationships with services, shared personal experiences, or engaged in identity-forming activities together may find sudden endings difficult, particularly if they have a history of disrupted relationships or inconsistent support. To avoid the sense of an abrupt withdrawal of support, endings should be managed gradually, with children being actively involved in the process. This can, it was thought, help mitigate feelings of rejection and abandonment, and provide children with a sense of continuity as they move forward. Participants also expressed the view that planning around transitions and endings should aim to empower children to build resilience, develop aspirations, and sustain progress beyond professional involvement, thus reducing reliance on services. Thoughtful, well-managed transitions may also help ensure positive identity development continues beyond the formal period of support, to the extent that they work to reinforce children's belief in their own ability to navigate challenges independently.

Include families and communities

Reflecting insights from contextual safeguarding, our study provides further support for the position that creating a supportive environment for children vulnerable to engaging in violence requires a holistic approach that extends beyond the individual. Professionals highlighted the importance of ensuring that support systems also **engage families**, recognising that a child's sense of self is shaped within their home environment.⁷⁰ Without addressing familial challenges and leveraging strengths within the family, children may struggle to develop or sustain a positive sense of self. This underlines the importance of services providing support to families alongside, or as part of, individual interventions, to create a more stable and nurturing foundation for children to build from.

Beyond family support, professionals emphasised the role of **wider community engagement** in fostering positive identity development.⁷¹ Professionals highlighted that a sense of belonging and purpose can be reinforced when children see opportunities for growth and connection in their local area. Some professionals suggested that services adopt a more **collaborative, community-based approach**, partnering with local businesses to create employment pathways, expanding outreach efforts to ensure that all

⁶⁸ P01, P05, P10, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19, YP group 3.

⁶⁹ P04, P05, P07, P16, YP04, YP group 3.

⁷⁰ P04, P11, P12, P16, P17, P19.

⁷¹ P01, P03, P07, P08, P10, P12, P13, P15, P16, P19.

vulnerable children receive support, and promoting safe community spaces where children feel valued and heard.

As explored in Chapter 1, a child's self-concept is shaped not just by the service support and interventions they receive, but also by the relationships, opportunities, and societal messages that surround them. By intervening and embedding support within the family, community, and cultural context of each child, services may help to foster environments where positive identity formation – a sense of belonging, self-worth, and ambition – is encouraged and actively reinforced.

Ensure staff have comprehensive skills, training and support within a service environment that is conducive to good practice

Our findings suggest that there is room for **training for professionals to place greater emphasis on supporting children's identity development**.⁷² Participants felt that while some useful training exists (such as training on trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practice), the preponderance of training and professional development available to professionals across the system of support does not focus on helping children build a positive sense of self. Some professionals noted that youth work and clinical psychology are exceptions to this, and called for professional development in other services to draw on training in those professions, to expand understanding of concepts of identity and skills in relationship-building and supporting children to develop a positive sense of self. One suggestion was to increase opportunities for cross-sector training, which might also help to foster greater collaboration between services.

Our findings also suggest it would be helpful for services to **strengthen cultural competence and sensitivity**, as well as **representation of diversity within their workforce**.⁷³ Participants stressed the importance of professionals understanding and being responsive to the cultural and social contexts of the children they support, to ensure services are accessible and relevant. It was also suggested that having staff who reflect, or can in some way personally relate to, the backgrounds and experiences of children can help to foster greater trust and engagement – though some professionals cautioned against the assumption that 'relatability' is not achieved simply, or exclusively, by matching characteristics such as ethnicity or gender.

Some professionals also noted that short courses alone are unlikely to create meaningful shifts in practice, particularly given service resource constraints. Embedding training more effectively into everyday practice requires **a wider service environment that is**

⁷² P01, P02, P04, P06, P10, P11, P12, P15, P16, P20, YP group 2, YP group 3.

⁷³ P01, P03, P07, P08, P10, P15, P19.

conducive to good practice.⁷⁴ These participants noted that professionals need time, reasonable caseloads, and supportive management and leadership.

Alongside this, our interview findings suggest that **staff across the system of support need more support to manage the emotional demands of their work.**⁷⁵ Some participants highlighted the risk that, without reflective spaces, professionals may struggle with the pressures of their roles or unintentionally project their own experiences onto the children they support. Suggestions included expanding the provision of clinical supervision or peer reflection opportunities across services, to help staff sustain their well-being and deliver more stable, constructive support.

Strengthen collaboration between services

Most professionals and several young people suggested that **a more joined-up, collaborative approach between services** could improve the way vulnerable children are supported.⁷⁶ Given that children's involvement in violence often stems from a combination of factors, more effective coordination between services could help each service to build a fuller picture of each child's circumstances, and enable more tailored interventions. As explored earlier in this report, participants described the current system as highly fragmented, with education, social care, health, police, and youth justice agencies frequently working in isolation, and a lack of coordination undermining the effectiveness of support. Our findings suggest a more cohesive approach that delivers joined-up support would help provide children with a greater sense of stability and trust in the system of support.

A more collaborative model and more effective information sharing across services may also help challenge 'thin' or problem-saturated narratives about children's lives. When professionals from different backgrounds share their insights, it can lead to a **more balanced and nuanced understanding of a child's experiences, needs, strengths and interests.** This may in turn improve opportunities to deliver support to address needs, alongside intervention and positive activities that focus on enabling children to pursue aspirations and interests, and develop social and emotional skills.⁷⁷

As mentioned above in relation to development of trusting relationships, **key worker models** may make it easier for children to form meaningful and trusting relationships with a smaller number of professionals, rather than navigating multiple disconnected interactions.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ P01, P19.

⁷⁵ P01, P03, P11.

⁷⁶ P01, P02, P04, P06, P07, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, YP03, YP04, YP group 2, YP group 3.

⁷⁷ P04, P11, P15, P16.

⁷⁸ P06, P14, P15, P16, YP group 2, YP group 3.

Participants acknowledged, however, that multi-agency collaboration is often inconsistent and difficult to achieve in practice, and efforts to improve it subject to a range of challenges and barriers. Professionals noted that barriers to improvement include variation in the extent to which local areas have formal structures for cross-sector partnership working. Limited funding and resources also mean services are under pressure to prioritise immediate service provision over making longer-term strategic changes to foster stronger multi-agency collaboration. Additionally, professionals observed that different sectors conceptualise issues relating to vulnerability to engagement in violence in conflicting ways, which can create friction or resistance to joint working. There were also concerns that information-sharing across agencies would need to be managed carefully to support shared or better-informed decision-making, without curtailing children's and families' rights to data privacy.

These participants noted that addressing these challenges requires systemic change.⁷⁹ Their suggestions included **clearer frameworks for inter-agency collaboration, better communication mechanisms, and greater alignment around shared goals**. Some professionals suggested the need to strengthen a **culture of partnership**, where professionals recognise the value of different expertise and approaches, to help overcome the factors that currently inhibit joint working. Ensuring that services have **sufficient resources** to plan and engage in meaningful collaboration, rather than viewing it as an additional burden, was also viewed as necessary to make more joined-up approaches viable in practice.

Involve children in meaningful co-design and co-production of services

Involving children in **meaningful co-design and co-production of services** was described by many of our participants as holding significant potential to foster positive identity development among vulnerable children.⁸⁰ By actively involving children in shaping the services that affect them, co-production may help strengthen their sense of agency, belonging, and self-worth. However, participants also highlighted significant challenges that need careful management in order for this to be meaningful.

Co-production can take various forms, from consulting children on service design to giving them a direct role in decision-making processes. Examples suggested by participants included involving children in staff recruitment, building re-design or refurbishment, or designing discrete intervention activities. Participants highlighted the importance of **being clear on whether decision-making is child-led, co-led, or service-led in consultation with children**, to ensure expectations are realistic.⁸¹

⁷⁹ P15, P16, P18.

⁸⁰ P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, YP04, YP group 3.

⁸¹ P01, P02, P04, P05, P11, P15, P16, P20.

Regardless of the model used, some participants stressed that **children should be adequately supported throughout their involvement** and fairly compensated for their contributions.⁸²

Professionals cited a range of benefits to effective implementation of co-production.⁸³ Benefits included more relevant and impactful services: as one professional noted, children are 'experts in their own lives',⁸⁴ and their direct input allows services to better understand their needs and tailor interventions accordingly. It can also help services remain responsive to children's evolving challenges and concerns, which can in turn help interventions to remain relevant and engaging. Further, genuine participation in decision-making may enhance children's self-perception as capable and valued contributors to their communities, reinforcing a sense of personal agency and responsibility. Participants also suggested that children see their contributions leading to real change, it affirms their worth and fosters a sense of belonging.

Alongside these potential benefits, however, participants identified significant risks and limitations. A key concern was the **risk of tokenism**, either through children's contributions being ignored or through their instrumentalization to advance service agendas.⁸⁵ If children perceive that their involvement is performative rather than meaningful, participants cautioned that they may feel misled and as a result seek to disengage from services.

Participants emphasised that **co-production should only be undertaken if services are prepared to implement change as a result**.⁸⁶ For marginalised groups, who are frequently consulted without seeing tangible outcomes, repeated engagement in unproductive processes can exacerbate distrust in services. To avoid this, co-production should be purposeful, feasible, and directly linked to service improvements.

Issues of representation were also noted: some participants warned that unless co-production includes a diverse range of voices, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities or misrepresenting the needs of certain groups. **Ensuring that co-production efforts are inclusive and that children involved genuinely reflect the communities being served** was seen by these participants as essential to its effectiveness.⁸⁷

Finally, participants recognised that co-production can be resource-intensive, requiring both time and funding that services may struggle to allocate.⁸⁸ Some children may also be unwilling or unready to engage, meaning co-production efforts must be flexible and

⁸² P01, P05.

⁸³ P01, P02, P05, P06, P11, P12, P14, P13, P15, P16, P17, P19.

⁸⁴ P15.

⁸⁵ P01, P02, P05, P08, P12, P14, P15, P16, YP group 3.

⁸⁶ P01, P02, P04, P05, P14, P16.

⁸⁷ P15, P16, P19.

⁸⁸ P01, P02, P08, P14.

responsive to their needs.⁸⁹ **Transparency from services about the scope and limitations of children’s involvement** was seen as crucial to maintaining trust and avoiding unrealistic expectations.⁹⁰

Co-production was, then, viewed as having significant potential to support children’s identity development by fostering agency, self-worth, and meaningful engagement with services. When children are genuinely involved in shaping the support they receive, services may become more effective, relevant, and accessible. However, for co-production to be impactful, it must be **carefully designed to align expectations, avoid tokenism, ensure diversity of representation, and lead to tangible outcomes**. Adequate resources and structural support are essential for sustaining meaningful participation, and services must be transparent about the extent to which children’s contributions can shape decision-making. Our findings suggest that, when these challenges are acknowledged and addressed by services, co-production can play a transformative role in strengthening children’s sense of identity and belonging.

Improve funding and resources

Our findings suggest an urgent need to **improve the funding and resources available across the system of support**. While the above suggestions for how services can better support children’s identity development range from features of practice to the broader configuration of services and wider systems of support, participants highlighted an even more foundational issue: without adequate funding, services cannot effectively implement improvements.⁹¹ Resource constraints can leave staff stretched across heavy caseloads, with inadequate capacity to build trusted relationships within which children’s needs can be addressed, and their strengths and opportunities nurtured. Similarly, financial constraints undermine the extent to which services and systems are able to think and act strategically, and make structural changes to improve inclusivity, optimally balance prevention and response, upskill workforces and embed practice improvements, and coordinate effectively across the system of support.

In particular, some professionals highlighted the need for **greater investment in youth work as a sector**.⁹² As discussed throughout this report, skilled and well-resourced youth work plays an especially vital role in supporting children to develop a positive self of sense, providing trusted relationships and opportunities for positive activities within safe spaces that help to broaden world views, develop self-worth and aspirations, strengthen social and emotional skills, and build resilience. Our findings suggest vulnerable children would benefit from increased investment in the development of youth

⁸⁹ P08, P14, P20.

⁹⁰ P01, P02, P04, P05, P11, P15, P16, P20.

⁹¹ P01, P02, P04, P06, P11, P15.

⁹² P04, P06, P12.

work professionals and expansion of the sector, to ensure consistent availability of high quality youth work across the country.

Address systemic biases

Finally, our findings suggest that efforts to ensure the system of support enables all children, including the most vulnerable, to develop a positive sense of self need to be accompanied by progress towards a more comprehensively inclusive and equitable society. Participants underscored the necessity of embedding practical service and systemic improvements within a broader effort to **confront deeply entrenched societal prejudices and systemic inequalities**.⁹³ These findings indicate that advancement towards a truly effective system of support depends in part on broader progress towards a society free from racism, ableism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression. A system of support that fosters positive identity development and empowerment needs to be situated within a broader societal context that values and enables all children to thrive. Participants emphasised that this cannot be achieved by isolated changes within service provision, but demands robust political, economic and cultural support for systemic transformation.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how services and the broader system of support can support children's identity development in ways that may help reduce their involvement in violence. Our findings indicate that that services can play a role in fostering positive identity development by prioritising trusted relationships, adopting strengths-based approaches, and providing children with opportunities that help build aspirations and social and emotional skills. Additionally, ensuring that services are inclusive, accessible, and flexible may help increase engagement and ensure that children feel valued and supported.

Beyond individual interventions and services, our findings suggest that broader systemic improvements could help create a more effective and supportive environment for vulnerable children. Developing the skills and capacity of professionals working with children, and ensuring their working environments (including caseloads, accountability measures, and service leadership) enable good practice to be embedded, is important to enhance the quality of support available. Co-production approaches that meaningfully involve children, families, and communities in shaping services have the potential to foster a sense of agency, belonging, and trust. While many children interact with multiple services, professionals often work in silos, leading to fragmented and inconsistent support. Greater collaboration between services to deliver integrated, cross-sector

⁹³ P03, P05, P08, P10, P11, P12, P15, P16, P17, P18.

approaches could help ensure children receive coordinated and sustained assistance that meets their individual needs.

Importantly, many of the suggestions outlined in this chapter are not new. Calls for more relational, strengths-based, and holistic approaches to supporting vulnerable children have been made for many years, often based on extensive evidence from research and practice. Our findings add to this body of evidence, reinforcing the importance of approaches that have long been recognised as beneficial. There remain, however, significant barriers to implementing these approaches at scale, while the challenges they seek to address have become increasingly urgent. Many services are operating under severe financial constraints, making it difficult to prioritise long-term, preventative approaches over immediate crisis response. Systemic issues with fragmented service provision and structural inequalities continue to limit the effectiveness of services aimed at supporting children's positive development.

This highlights the need for a renewed commitment to strengthening the system of support for vulnerable children. Achieving meaningful and lasting change will require sustained investment in services, improved collaboration across sectors, and action to address the wider social and economic conditions that shape children's lives. While there are no simple solutions, ensuring that services are equipped to foster positive identity development is a vital step in creating an environment where children feel supported, hopeful, and able to pursue a future free from violence.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between children's interactions with systems of support, their identity formation, and engagement in violence. Based on consultation with young people and professionals who support them, and informed by advice from our Young Researchers Advisory Panel and Expert Advisory Group, the research highlights that, while services can profoundly influence children's sense of self and the world around them, these influences are fundamentally intertwined with broader social and structural factors. The findings suggest that strengthening children's protection from and resilience to violence requires thoughtful, evidence-based systemic change.

Reflections and implications for support services

Children's identities are shaped not in isolation but through dynamic and interdependent relationships with their environments. As important parts of these environments, services hold the potential to scaffold positive identity formation and aspirations. Positive service experiences – characterised by trust, affirmation, inclusion, and empowerment – can support children in developing resilient, confident, hopeful identities. Conversely, when children experience services as fragmented, as overlooking their individuality and complexity, and as insufficiently inclusive, this runs the risk of contributing to feelings of alienation, which in turn can increase vulnerability to violence.

An important finding from this research is how important language and narrative framing are. The labels, terminology, and narratives that services use to describe and understand children involved in violence can have a profound impact. Negative, blame-focused labels and narratives, including labels such as 'offender' or 'perpetrator', risk reinforcing limiting and potentially damaging self-perceptions, inappropriately adultifying children, and perpetuating vulnerability to violence. This is not to suggest that accountability should be avoided, but rather that more effective approaches exist: ones that combine responsibility with meaningful support to help children positively reshape their trajectories. Adopting language that recognises children's strengths, potential, and capacity for change can help foster more positive identities and encourage engagement with support. This approach aligns with strengths-based practices and highlights the value of seeing each child as an individual, while recognising how their contexts have shaped them.

It is also essential to recognise that children's experiences of services are patterned by intersecting characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, neurodivergence, and socioeconomic status. An intersectional lens is key to understanding and addressing entrenched disparities in how children experience and engage with support services (including, for example, the ways in which prevalent stereotypes intersect with labelling,

and how this shapes interpretations of and responses to children's behaviours). Tailoring support in ways that acknowledge and respond to children's intersecting characteristics may help to ensure that all children receive equitable and effective care and support.

Our study aimed to identify helpful insights for systems of support. To strengthen support for children in ways that scaffold positive identity formation, the following principles may be beneficial for consideration:

- **Adopting holistic, strengths-based approaches:** Beneficial approaches build on children's strengths and aspirations, while addressing challenges. Professionals should be supported to engage in affirming, empathetic, and culturally sensitive practice that validates children's experiences and offers opportunities to develop potential. Thoughtful use of language and narrative framing is an important part of this approach.
- **Fostering trusted relationships:** Consistency in relationships with skilled, trusted professionals is a key factor in enhancing children's sense of safety, belonging, and self-worth. Support endings and transitions need careful planning. Investing in workforce development and retention, and ensuring professionals have the time and support they need, may help to strengthen relationships.
- **Enhancing inclusivity and accessibility:** Proactively cultivating a welcoming space, and identifying and reducing barriers to access – particularly for children facing intersecting disadvantages – may help to ensure that all children in need of support feel valued, included, and able to receive help.
- **Strengthening early intervention:** Proactive identification and support for emerging needs can play a crucial role (alongside more responsive approaches) in preventing challenges from escalating and supporting positive identity development from an early age. Care should be taken to ensure early intervention avoids targeting children in ways that contribute to negative self-perceptions or reinforce cycles of disadvantage.
- **Strengthening coordination across services:** Integrated, cross-sector approaches that prioritise coherence and continuity in service provision could reduce the adverse consequences of fragmented support, promote engagement, and help achieve more coordinated delivery multi-faceted support to address multiple needs.
- **Empowering children, families, and communities as partners:** Enabling children to participate meaningfully in shaping the support they receive can enhance their sense of agency and ensure that services are responsive to their unique needs and perspectives. By working to embed support within the family, community, and cultural context of each child, services may also foster more conducive environments for positive identity formation.

Driving implementation: enabling sustainable progress

The suggestions presented above not only capture the perspectives of young people and professionals involved in this study, but also align with much existing research and evidence. Indeed, many of the recommendations are not new, but echo long-standing calls to reinforce systems of support. We recognise, however, that any change to systems of support is inherently complex, and progress has been gradual. To enable sustainable improvement, the following considerations may be helpful:

- **Strategic investment:** Targeted and sustained investment, particularly in under-resourced communities and sectors, could enhance the capacity of services to provide holistic, preventative support.
- **Policy alignment:** National and local policies that prioritise children's long-term well-being may support the consistent delivery of effective, inclusive services. Aligning policies to encourage preventative, strengths-based approaches may yield more positive outcomes over time.
- **Accountability and evaluation:** Transparent, participatory evaluation frameworks can help track progress, encourage continual learning, and ensure services are meeting their goals effectively and equitably.
- **Conducive service cultures:** Fostering a culture within services that encourages inclusive, strengths-based approaches, and supports professionals in developing relational skills and embedding good practice, could help drive progress within the systems of support.

Addressing macro-level factors

While there is much that services can – and do – achieve in supporting children to develop a positive sense of self, of the world around them, and of their own potential futures, broader societal structures also profoundly shape children's development. Addressing a range of structural factors may further support efforts to foster positive identity formation and reduce children's vulnerability to violence. Our findings suggest the following considerations:

- **Investing in community infrastructure:** Enhancing access to high-quality education, health, and youth services in disadvantaged areas could provide children with more consistent opportunities to thrive.
- **Promoting inclusion and equity:** Efforts to ensure institutions and socioeconomic structures are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diversity in our society could help reduce experiences of discrimination and exclusion.
- **Supporting economic equity:** Addressing factors such as child poverty, housing insecurity, and access to meaningful opportunities could help reduce underlying vulnerabilities.

- **Strengthening family support:** Accessible family support services, including mental health care and parenting programmes, could contribute to ensuring more stable and nurturing environments for children.

Realising meaningful and lasting change requires a combination of strategic investment, policy alignment, and a commitment to continual learning and reflection. Our findings suggest that, while the complexity of these challenges means that no single solution will suffice, action to foster inclusive, coordinated, and empowering systems of support, alongside action to address broader structural inequalities, could better enable children to develop identities that help protect them from violence.

These reflections aim to contribute constructively to ongoing discussions about how best to support children in navigating the profound complexities of youth. We hope they provide a useful foundation for further research on this topic, and a thoughtful basis for considering how services and broader systems can continue to evolve and strengthen the support they offer, to enable all children to flourish.

Bibliography

- Alessi, Edward J. & Sarilee Kahn. 2022. 'Toward a trauma-informed qualitative research approach: Guidelines for ensuring the safety and promoting the resilience of research participants.' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 20(1): 121-154. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2022.2107967>
- Becker, Howard S. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. 'Cultural reproduction and social reproduction.' In *Power and ideology in education*, edited by J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey, 487-511. Open University Press.
- Carlone, Heidi B., & Angela Johnson. 2007. 'Understanding the science experiences of successful women of color: Science identity as an analytic lens.' *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 44(8): 1187-1218. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20237>
- Case, Stephen, & Ann Browning. 2021. *Child first justice: the research evidence-base* [full report]. As of 10 March 2025: https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Child_First_Justice_the_research_evidence-base_Full_report_/14152040?file=26748341
- Crest Advisory. 2025. *The role of key workers in supporting children and young people with experience of serious youth violence: Research report*. Government Social Research. As of 10 March 2025: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67b456d2b56d8b0856c2fdd7/The_role_of_key_workers_in_supporting_children_and_young_people_with_experience_of_serious_youth_violence.pdf
- Davis, Jahnine, & Nicholas Marsh. 2020. 'Boys to men: The cost of 'adultification' in safeguarding responses to Black boys.' *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 8(2): 255-259. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986020X15945756023543>
- Department for Education (DfE). 2019. *Timpson review of school exclusion: technical note*. As of 10 March: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799910/Technical_note.pdf
- Firmin, Carlene E., Jayne Horan, Dez Holmes, & Gail Hopper. 2016. *Safeguarding during adolescence: the relationship between contextual safeguarding, complex safeguarding and transitional safeguarding*. Contextual Safeguarding Network. As of 10 March 2025: <https://www.oscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Safeguarding-during-adolescence-Briefing-Jan19.pdf>

- Gee, James P. 2000. 'Identity as an analytic lens for research in education.' *Review of Research in Education*, 25(1): 99-125. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X025001099>
- Hatt, Beth. 2007. 'Street smarts vs. book smarts: The figured world of smartness in the lives of marginalized, urban youth.' *The Urban Review*, 39(2): 145-166. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-007-0047-9>
- Holland, Dorothy, William Lachicotte Jr., Debra Skinner, & Carole Cain. 1998. *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Harvard University Press. As of 10 March 2025: https://www.infoamerica.org/documentos_pdf/holland02.pdf
- Holland, Dorothy, & Jean Lave. 2001. 'History in person: An introduction.' In *History in person: Enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities*, edited by D. Holland & J. Lave, 3-34. SAR Press. As of 10 March 2025: https://sarweb.org/media/files/sarpress_history_in_person_chapter1.pdf
- Huegler, Nathalie, & Gillian Ruch. 2022. 'Risk, Vulnerability and Complexity: Transitional Safeguarding as a Reframing of Binary Perspectives.' *Practice*, 34(1): 25-39. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2021.1932787>
- Johnson, Angela, Jaweer Brown, Heidi Carlone, & Azita K. Cuevas. 2011. 'Authoring identity amidst the treacherous terrain of science: A multiracial feminist examination of the journeys of three women of color in science.' *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 48(4): 339-366. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20411>
- Open Innovation Team. 2023. *The role of systems of support in serious youth violence: evidence and gaps*. Department for Education and Youth Endowment Fund: London, UK.
- Popham, Cassandra. 2024. 'Behind the knife crime statistics: understanding children who carry weapons'. Youth Endowment Fund, 23 May 2024. As of 10 March 2025: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/behind-the-knife-crime-statistics-understanding-children-who-carry-weapons/#:~:text=76%25%20felt%20safe%20in%20school,transport%20and%20in%20public%20parks>.
- Rosenfield, Sarah. 2012. 'Triple jeopardy? Mental health at the intersection of gender, race, and class.' *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(11): 1791-801. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.11.010
- Sewell, William H. 1992. 'A theory of Structure: Duality, agency, and transformation.' *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1): 1-29. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1086/229967>
- Sfard, Anna, & Anna Prusak. 2005. 'Telling identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity.' *Educational Researcher*, 34(4): 14-22. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034004014>

- Urrieta, Luis Jr. 2007. 'Figured Worlds and education: An introduction to the special issue.' *The Urban Review*, 39(2): 107-116. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-007-0051-0>
- Vygotsky, Lev S. 1987. 'Imagination and its development in childhood.' (N. Minick, Trans.). In *The collective works of L. S. Vygotsky, vol 1: Problems of general psychology, including the volume thinking and speech*, edited by R. W. Reiber & A. S. Carton, 339-349. Springer. As of 10 March 2025: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-1655-8_15
- Watson, Tony J. 2008. 'Managing identity: Identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances.' *Organization*, 15(1): 121-143. As of 10 March 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508407084488>
- Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). 2021. *Social skills training*. As of 10 March 2025: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/social-skills-training/>
2022. *Mentoring*. As of 10 March 2025: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/mentoring-2/>
- 2024a. *Children, violence and vulnerability 2024. Report 1: Who is affected by violence?* As of 10 March 2025: https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CVV24_R1_OverallViolence.pdf
- 2024b. *Education, Children and Violence: Guidance for school, college and alternative provision leaders to help prevent children's involvement in violence*. As of 10 March 2025: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/education-guidance/>
2025. *Racial disproportionality in violence affecting children and young people*. As of 10 March 2025: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/racial-disproportionality/>

Annex 1: Ethical and data protection considerations

Co-designed with YRAP and EAG members, all study processes and materials prioritised ethical considerations. An ethical protocol was developed by the study team and approved by Dartington Service Design Lab's research ethics committee (LabREC). The LabREC process considers ethical issues related to: informed consent and assent; the legal bases for data collection and use; vulnerability; privacy; considerations of anti-racism, intersectionality and equality, diversity and inclusion; safeguarding (including participant and researcher safety); and necessary supports and signposting.

Where possible, we gave children and young people a choice in consultation methods, were considerate to the location of research, and took care in the use of incentives, as well as being transparent about the purpose and use of research data (Alessi & Khan, 2022). We take anti-racism seriously, as outlined in Dartington's [anti-racism policy](#) and RAND's Quality Assurance Standards. In the context of this study, this included considering the racial and ethnic diversity of the project team, and working with partners, advisors and organisations with lived experience of racism and relevant expertise to help mitigate potential bias. Dartington's Equity Impact Assessment Framework guided project planning and delivery.

The initial design of data collection tools for use in interviews and consultation with the two participant groups was grounded in the research questions and then refined through co-design with the YRAP and EAG. They were shaped by a contextual safeguarding lens, exploring how identity operates in different domains, from families and peer groups, to particular services and children's wider communities. Co-design of the research tools with YRAP and EAG aimed to ensure that the framing of consultation activities and wording of questions were not retraumatising or stigmatising, and were appropriate and sensitive to the age and experiences of participants.

Based on advice from EAG members suggesting that children with experience of engagement in violence often prefer to be interviewed by an adult, consultations with children and young people were conducted by adult researchers with extensive experience in conducting qualitative data collection with similar groups. We took care to check that online interview participants were in a secure, confidential space.

Prior to taking part, participants were made aware of the nature of the topics that would be covered, informed about the voluntary nature of participation and withdrawal, and given clarity on how their information would be used and protected, including issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and the specific circumstances in which confidentiality would need to be breached.

In line with a trauma-informed approach, during data collection periods regular team meetings were held to discuss and respond to any emerging ethical considerations,

consider power dynamics, identify any arising topics which needed further exploration, and reflect on how researcher positionality may have influenced data collection.

All research team members in contact with children and young people had current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) approval and had received training in safeguarding policies, practices and procedures. Dartington's named Designated Safeguarding Lead and Deputy were available for advice and support. When collecting data with children and young people contacted through a gatekeeper organisation, the research team ensured that their standard operating and safeguarding procedures were known and adhered to.

Interviews were recorded with consent. Data were transcribed removing any personal identifiers, and transcripts were labelled with a unique identifier before being stored in restricted-access folders on secure, UK-based servers.

As the study funders, DfE were the 'data controller' for personal data, but no data were shared with, or accessed by, DfE or any others beyond the study team. RAND Europe and Dartington Service Design Lab were the 'data processors' for the study. The legal basis for processing personal data was 'public task', detailed in Article 6(1)e of the UK GDPR. The legal basis for processing any special category data in interviews, interview recordings, and written transcriptions was 'processing that is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes' as detailed in Article 9(2)(j) of the UK GDPR. The study team processed only what was required to meet these legal bases and ensured security and safeguards were in place to protect the information.

Annex 2: The theory of ‘identities in practice’

Holland et al. (1998) propose that people practice their identities through **four ‘contexts of activity’, which are relevant to our study: 1) figured worlds, 2) negotiations of positionality, 3) space of authoring, and 4) making worlds.** These contexts are not separate from one another but are understood as overlapping figurations of people’s identity work.

Figured worlds are real or imaginary ‘frames of meaning in which interpretations of human actions are negotiated’ (Holland et al., 1998). In our context, **figured worlds could include, for example, co-offending peer groups, families, and services** such as police, youth justice services, children’s social care, psychological support services and third sector youth work. Holland et al. (1998) state that when we act or speak in a certain way, we work to place ourselves within or outside of specific figured worlds. Figured worlds are considered to be pre-existing realms into which we enter, or which we are recruited into, so that we become members or inhabitants. We are all members of multiple figured worlds simultaneously. These ‘memberships’ are fluid and changeable, and may flow into, inform, or even conflict with one another, because figured worlds themselves can overlap with, sit within, or be separate from one another (Hatt, 2007). In addition, some of our figured world memberships may be the result of choice and deliberate identity work, whereas other memberships (such as within youth justice and other statutory services) may be forced upon us. Becoming a member of, or actor within, a figured world is not always necessarily a complete or easy process; while our membership of a figured world may be permanent, it may also be fleeting.

Next, Holland et al. (1998) put forward the context of ‘positionality’. **Children (and, indeed, adults) are positioned within figured worlds, such as services, in ways that are informed by dominant norms and ways of being in that figured world, and by the child’s overarching social position, resources, and characteristics.** Urrieta (2007) describes positionality as referring ‘to the positions ‘offered’ to people in different figured worlds’. **Through the positions offered or available to them, a person then develops a positional identity, or a ‘sense’ of their position within a figured world relative to others** (Holland et al., 1998). Positionality can thus be linked with the concept of ‘recognition’ of oneself and by others, often used in relation to identity theory (for example, Carlone and Johnson, 2007; Sfard and Prusak, 2005). Scholars using the concept of recognition suggest that our identity work is informed by how others recognise us as a particular ‘kind of person’ depending upon how we look and/or act in given time and place (Gee, 2000). For example, we may be recognised as a model pupil, or as a ‘young offender,’ because our actions and interactions align with how these ‘kinds of people’ are expected to look or act. Similarly, the positional identities offered to people are informed by the dominant ways of being in a figured world. What positional identities are offered or available to people within a figured world are necessarily influenced by the

cultural models and storylines that make up that figured world, and the extent to which individuals have the kinds of resources that are privileged within the world. Thus, the positions available to an individual may result from their overarching social positions and/or their available resources, which Holland et al. (1998) at times refer to as 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1977). In this way, positionality is 'inextricably linked to power, status, and rank' (Holland et al., 1998).

The third context of identity in practice is 'space of authoring', also referred to as self-authoring, which describes people's identity work in response to the positions offered to them by others. Holland et al. (1998) frame this context as the 'focus' of their work, because the agency exercised through a person's space of authoring is what sets apart the concept of identities in practice from a more deterministic or structural understanding of identity. Importantly for this study, this means that **children respond to how they are positioned in non-deterministic ways: there is space for 'self-authoring', through which they can accept, reject, negotiate or ignore the positional identity offered to them by a figured world.** Self-authorship or self-making 'is not a choice'; a position always requires a response (Holland et al., 1998). As Urrieta (2007) states, however, a person's response to a position is 'limited to varying degrees of accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the identities being offered to them' (Urrieta, 2007). Our self-authoring could thus be compared with what Gee (2000) and others have referred to as the 'bid' to be recognised as a certain kind of person. Inescapably, whether and how one chooses to accept, reject, negotiate, or indeed completely ignore, a position is not the result of fully 'independent or autonomous creativity', (Holland et al., 1998), but is necessarily bound by the social practices and structures which position us. According to Holland et al. (1998), our authored selves become aspects of our 'history in-person', a concept later further developed by Holland and Lave (2001) which refers to 'the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18). In other words, our past lives can inform how we will author our identities in the present. This process may be as simple as using our experiences to repeat or cease a previous behaviour or way of being. For example, if a person's self-authoring consistently fails to be recognised by others, they are likely to abandon attempts to author themselves in this way (Johnson et al., 2011). Alternatively, self-authoring may involve what Holland et al. (1998) call a 'reinterpretation of the past' in order to reinvent our present or future identities using a new perspective on past experiences.

The fourth and final context for the production of identities is that of 'world making' (Holland et al., 1998); the possibility that people can create new figured worlds. These worlds can be brand new, or related to existing figured worlds (Urrieta, 2007). For our study, this offers the possibility that, **while children may be shaped by their experiences with services, their voices can also create change within the system of support.** The ability to create new figured worlds builds upon Vygotsky's studies of

how children's play can create new environments which allow the ability to rehearse adult social norms (for example, Vygotsky, 1987). In this way, 'just as children's play is instrumental in building their symbolic competences, upon which adult life depends, so too social play [...] develops new social competencies in newly imagined communities' (Holland et al., 1998). Through 'social play' we therefore not only develop new identities, but also new realms in which to practice these identities; new figured worlds into which others may enter, and which offer new ways of being and doing. Holland et al. (1998) state that this final context for identities in practice brings us back to the first context of figured worlds. Specifically, the ability to make worlds demonstrates the capacity of figured worlds to adapt in response to people's identity work. In other words, whilst figured worlds may be defined by the norms or storylines within them, people also have a capacity to change, or shift, these norms upon which figured worlds are built.



Department
for Education

© Department for Education copyright 2025

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Reference: RR1558

ISBN: 978-1-83870-713-2

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact www.gov.uk/contact-dfe.

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications.