

Child-Centred Policing in Practice: Examples, Barriers and Recommendations

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Introduction

StreetDoctors is a national charity that empowers young people affected by violence with lifesaving first aid skills and knowledge of the consequences of violence (charity number 1150925).

StreetDoctors have heard from young people who would be willing and able to help in first aid incidents, but are concerned about what happens when the police turn up – will they be treated as a suspect? Will the police harm or mishandle them? What happens if they are asked to give evidence?

This led us to consider how we can increase young people’s confidence to get involved in a first aid emergency, in terms of the police responses to young people affected by violence. One part of this is giving young people guidance on how to interact with the police and knowledge of their rights when there is an incident; we are developing this content now for our first aid training sessions.

Another part is changing how the police respond to young people – especially when dealing with a violent situation. Child-Centred Policing (CCP) is an approach that police forces can take when

interacting with children and young people that prevents the overcriminalisation of children and takes a safeguarding approach.

If CCP is fully realised, it could enable young people to feel like the police are there to help and protect them, not over criminalise them or aggravate a situation. In the long term, this will allow for more young people to feel confident in calling an ambulance or the police and get involved in delivering emergency first aid - and therefore young people can be part of the solution to violence and save more lives.

StreetDoctors teamed up with Police Now (a graduate training programme for neighbourhood police officers) to host internships for young police officers who have been through the programme to research this issue. In 2023, we hosted a Police Now graduate, Vickramarajah Shaarangan, to research CCP by speaking to police contacts from across the UK – looking at what it means, what good examples are there in practice and what are the barriers. This report is the outcome of this research, with recommendations for how CCP can be embedded further into policing.

Findings from this report will be used to support Alliance for Youth Justice's policy influencing work around 'Rethinking Policing'.

What is Child-Centred Policing?

Child-centred policing (CCP), also known as child-friendly or child-first policing, is an approach that prioritises the well-being of the child. It recognises that children have unique rights, vulnerabilities, and developmental needs that should be considered in any interaction with the police, and that traditional policing practices may not always be appropriate or effective. It emphasises building rapport, using age-appropriate communication techniques, and employing alternative dispute resolution methods whenever possible.

Part of a child focused approach to policing is acknowledging that children and young people require a tailored service when engaging with police, different to adults. Child and young adult perpetrators are also most likely victims of crime and circumstance, exacerbated by being in a transitional period in life. If mishandled by the criminal justice system, they may end up becoming repeat offenders which is why CCP is so important to reducing crime.

The main principles of CCP also known as the Four P's as taken from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child include:

Protection: Ensuring the safety and security of children. Safeguarding children from harm, abuse, and exploitation.

Participation: Promoting the active participation of children in decisions that affect them. Encouraging involvement creates a sense of trust, empowerment, and ownership over their safety and well-being.

Provision: Ensuring that appropriate services and support are available to children who come into contact with the police. This may include access to legal aid, counselling, healthcare, and social services.

Prevention: Focusing on proactive measures to prevent crime, victimisation, and delinquency among children. This can involve community engagement, education, and awareness programmes targeted at children, parents, and the wider community.

An additional final 'P' can be added to this approach –

Partnership: Collaborating with relevant stakeholders, such as child welfare agencies, schools, NGOs, and community organisations, to address the needs of children effectively. Building strong partnerships helps create a holistic support network for children.

By adopting a child-centred approach, law enforcement agencies aim to ensure the rights, safety, and well-being of children are upheld while fostering positive relationships between children and the police. This approach contributes to creating a safer and more inclusive environment for children to grow and thrive.

Methods for Research

I, Vickramarajah Shaarangan, conducted this research over four weeks in collaboration with StreetDoctors and Police Now.

I undertook primary research which involved interviewing police officers and allied professionals from 9 police forces, violence reduction units and third sector organisations.

Evidence in this report is based off data presented to me by interviewees, conversations that took place during interviews and also secondary, internet-based research. I have also added reflections in first person throughout, from my own experience of working with the police system.

Findings:

1. How Can Child-Centred Policing be Realised?

When I started this project, I had never heard the phrase ‘child-centred policing’. I believed that most frontline police officers would also be unaware of Child-Centred Policing (CCP), but, like myself, may be adopting principles of CCP even if they did not call it by that name. My hypothesis was corroborated when interviewing front line police officers; some officers had never previously heard of CCP itself but most that I spoke to agreed that they had engaged in some forms of the approach.

The majority of territorial police forces in England and Wales engage in some form of CCP including: outreach programmes, youth engagement programmes, tailored problem solving and specialist teams. A pioneering example of this is Kent Police who have recently established 13 CCP teams consisting of one sergeant, multiple Police Constables and Police Community Support Officers, covering 13 districts of the county.

In many areas, there is a public health approach to violence in place. This means police and allied organisations believe that violence is an epidemic and to properly deal with it there needs to be multi-agency approach. In Merseyside the police and Violence Reduction Unit has developed a Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Protocol which aims to reduce child exploitation across Merseyside.

CCP commonly involves ensuring that issues involving children are dealt with in a timely manner to prevent exacerbating problems the child is facing.

Importantly it was emphasised that treating children as children means starting with the word ‘child’. When dealing with a child, using the phrase ‘young person’ can result in adultification¹ by police colleagues and other professionals involved. When looking for rates of positive outcomes for referrals for alternative disposal methods, one interviewee said they found children would receive better results when the word ‘child’ was used in reports that were sent to magistrates and Criminal Prosecution Services.

Safer Schools officers in one police force noticed that searching students in school was having a negative effect on the children being searched. Based on the idea of ‘Participation’ as a key principle of CCP, they changed their practice and refused to search children at schools (except in situations where children did not consent for their teachers to search them). In this example, ensuring that teachers and head teachers understood the police’s authority and role was crucial; teachers were able to search students, rather than needing to refer to the police each time.

2. Good Practice Initiatives

Your Stance Zero Responder workshops with the Met Police

YourStance is a preventative education project which endeavours to minimise damage caused by serious youth violence (SYV) by bringing experienced healthcare professionals to teach life saving skills to young people. YourStance teaches vulnerable young people aged 11 – 25 how to perform basic life support (BLS), cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and haemorrhage control becoming ‘Zero Responders’ before a first responder is able to arrive. The project frequently aims to collaborate with other statutory and public sector services to further improve what can be done in the community to improve relations with young people and reduce the risks posed by SYV. YourStance were invited to collaborate in a pilot project with the Metropolitan police in West London after concerns of rising SYV in the area. Initially this collaboration was with the West London BCU/emergency response team and later became a collaboration with the West London youth engagement team. Healthcare professionals alongside Metropolitan police officers delivered 7 interactive ‘zero responder’ teaching sessions to young people in alternative education provisions and youth hubs in London borough of Hillingdon between October 2022 and June 2023. 80 young people were taught, 11 healthcare professional volunteers and 10 Metropolitan police officers (3 emergency response officers and 7 young engagement officers) were involved in the pilot. The pilot project is currently being evaluated and findings will be presented next year.

Operation Encompass – all 43 territorial police forces

Operation Encompass is an early intervention safeguarding partnership between police and the education system. It enables support for children and young people who are experiencing domestic abuse. When an incident of domestic abuse occurs and a child is identified as being involved or related to one of the adults, the incident is logged by the attending officers. This is then shared with a trained ‘key adult’ at the school before the beginning of the next school day. The ‘key adult’ then passes this information to the students’ teacher who is then prepared to support the child and has the context

¹ Definition of adultification: When notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. Certain aspects of that child’s personal characteristics, socio-economic situation or lived experiences are met with discriminatory responses. This means that, rather than being seen as children experiencing abuse, they are viewed as either responsible in some way, or as more resilient and able to withstand maltreatment. (Davis and Marsh, 2020)

for any changes in behaviour. Operation Encompass reinforces the need for those engaging with children to take a trauma-informed approach when supporting and nurturing the child.

In 2020 a survey of 27 territorial police forces found 143,000 notifications of domestic violence were sent to schools. A head teacher in the *2023 Operation Encompass Impact Report* commented “Operation Encompass is the biggest positive change in safeguarding in my career”.

Getting involved with Kick Off @ 3 – Kent Police

‘Kick off @3’ is an organisation that aims to inspire, motivate, engage and support young people from all backgrounds through the medium of sport and music. They set up a football match with Kent Police in June 2023 with the aim to give children the confidence to engage more with local authorities and improve the relationships between children and police officers in their schools.



School officers attended the relaxed event without their regular uniform or kit and food and drink was provided. The event was hosted during the holidays when there is an increase of offending, and this provided the children with an opportunity to do something productive.

About twenty children attended the event. Some of these children later came to police attention but because they knew the Safer Schools officers, they were more willing to engage with them in a productive manner.

The Pledge – Kent Police and Kent Violence Reduction Unit

Students across Kent have been signing on to a pledge to keep themselves and others safe from knife harm and violent crime. It was created by Kent Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) and Kent Police in 2022 after the success of using the Ben Kinsella exhibition to inform children about violent crime. Currently over forty schools and approximately 1,500 children have signed up to the scheme. It is expanding to include local businesses in the community - identifying the premises as standing against violent crime and a space where young people can go to feel safe and discuss concerns about knife crime.



**Violence Reduction Unit
Commitment Pledge**

**Innovating and collaborating
to keep communities safe**

By signing below, we are making a public promise:

- If we are in possession of a weapon, we will dispose of it safely
- We will never wield, or use, a weapon of any type that could cause harm to anyone
- If we feel we don't have options, we will ask for help
- If someone we know has a weapon, we will report it
- We will always strive to behave in a non-violent manner
- We will encourage and support our friends to join us in these promises

Signed on behalf of the pupils: _____

VRU
Kent and Medway

Fearless
The Ben Kinsella Trust
Stop Knife Crime

Kent Police

Schools Team
Child Contact Centres

Trauma Support Team at Royal London Hospital – Met Police

The Trauma Support Team (TST) is a first-of-its-kind police support team based in the Royal London Hospital (RLH). It aims to improve the quality of engagements with young people affected by violence and the police, by having dedicated police officers based at the hospital who are trained specifically to establish relationships with victims of violent crime, NHS staff and NGOs.



Their role begins as soon as a young person comes into resuscitation (after being treated). The TST take a trauma-informed approach to build a relationship with the young person or child. Because trust can be built, it enables the TST to find out more about the violent incident and how they can keep the young person safe. There has been a 417% increase in information gathered from young people as part of this scheme, allowing officers to better safeguard young people.

When looking at NHS staff opinions of the TST and the work they do, there was a 19% increase in the number of staff who reported feeling informed of police involvement with patients under their care and an improvement of 18% in reported confidence of reporting criminal activity.

When comparing the outcomes of crimes from two trauma centres RLH and Kings College Hospital, the charge rate is higher by 3% at RLH and there is a 3% lower chance of the report being closed due to victims unwillingness to give information. When looking at the likelihood of ethnic minority victims being able to have their suspect charged, it is higher at the RLH than at Kings College.

From this it is clear there has been an improvement in intelligence sharing, outcomes of cases and more trust between child victims and partner agencies. The TST also reduces pressure on frontline officers, who can spend less time in hospital, which leads to an improvement in primary investigations.

Your Stance ‘Zero Responder’ workshops with Metropolitan Police

Reboot – Sussex Police

‘Reboot’ is a four-stage early intervention scheme with the aim to engage with children before they become involved with crime and or violence. The programme takes a strengths-based approach to focus on the child’s strengths rather than their weaknesses. ‘Reboot’ collaborates with several partner agencies across Sussex. At the core of the ‘Reboot’ scheme is the need for police to work with the child and the family to identify which diversionary activities would interest and be suitable for the child. If after all the 4 stages of intervention have been completed the child continues to be at-risk, they will be escalated to another support service such as the Youth Offending Service.

In the first year of the programme in 2019, there were 1000 referrals made. Of the 938 children that engaged, 70% exited the programme at the first stage and did not require further interventions. 82% of the children who engaged with the programme and continued to be monitored were assessed as no longer at risk. 70% of children involved stated that 'Reboot' had a positive impact on helping them achieve their personal goals.

Project based learning – Northumbria Violence Reduction Unit (VRU)

Project based learning is led by the VRU team in alternative provisions and pupil referral units. It introduces children to violence reduction themes where they direct and take responsibility for their own learning. Project based learning is based on real world situations which tackle issues such as harm from Adverse Childhood Experiences, coercive family interactions, poly-victimisation through exposure to multiple forms of abuse, and a lack of positive social interactions with trusted adults.

From a review conducted by Newcastle University, pupil engagement is positive, showing that pupils enjoy the interaction with the VRU team and visitors.

The end of project showcases (pictures below) provide a platform for pupils to share their work with others, allowing the young people a sense of pride and success.



Operation Inclusion – Merseyside Violence Prevention Partnership

Operation Inclusion is a Deferred Prosecution Scheme with the aim to offer children a chance to change their behaviour before they enter the Youth Justice System. It gives children opportunities to engage in a voluntary, needs-led programme as an alternative to receiving a statutory order and criminal record. It also allows for opportunities to identify child criminal exploitation.

The targeted group is people aged 13-17 who have been arrested by Merseyside Police and meet the charge threshold for Court or a Youth Conditional Caution. Referrals can also be linked to community intelligence around the potential for violent behaviour, exploitation, or re-offending.

During the 2 years of 2021 and 2022, Operation Inclusion had 132 entrants (105 male & 27 female) with 123 children completing the intervention. Out of the 123 who completed their intervention only 7 children have re-offended and of those, 6 resulted in community resolutions.

3. Barriers to Realising Child-Centred Policing

Everyday Interactions with Young People

Every interaction with a young person is an opportunity to change their perception. Currently there is a need to develop relationships with children and young people because the perception often is that the police are the “enemy”. When dealing with an incident on scene, children can often be treated as perpetrators before conclusive evidence is gathered - perhaps due to the young person's actions or attitude and their suspicion towards the police. Even if young people are deemed to be perpetrators, understanding the victim/perpetrator cycles means these distinctions are often blurred – and perpetrators are often victims themselves of wider circumstances – therefore their needs are often similar. The lack of understanding about this by police officers reinforces negative views of the police and can lead to young people becoming arrested or cautioned. For example, when officers are searching young people and they are not respectful or do not explain why they are conducting a search in a way that is accessible to the child or young person, it can make the child more distrustful of the police and can escalate behaviour very quickly.

When looking at violent crime specifically, girls and young women do not receive the same support boys and young men do, since the violence they are affected by can be less visible. This needs to be addressed as a priority when implementing Child-Centred Policing (CCP). In an interview with an officer who works on a dedicated CCP unit, they stated that because of the fixation on ‘response policing’², we have lost the trust of multiple generations of young people, and we now have the opportunity to recover a generation and must do everything possible to do so.

Frontline officers do not have the training, time, or resources to properly take a child-centred approach, whereas specialised units do. Frontline officers are repeatedly described as “slaves to the radio going from call to call”³ and lack the time to take a child-centred approach at each incident they attend. Specialised units such as the Trauma Support Team at Royal London Hospital who do not carry out investigations therefore can implement CCP approaches more fully. In addition, specialised units receive far more training when it comes to elements of CCP such as adverse childhood experiences and trauma informed policing, meaning that their skills in taking a child-centred approach are generally better than frontline officers. However, the problem is that the frontline officers have the most frequent interactions with children.

Reluctance to change

When there is new training offered in the police I have personally observed that a lot of officers are set in their ways and believe that there is “no point in reinventing the wheel”. I believe this to be due to the number of new training courses frontline police officers are expected to complete on top of the huge active workload. When speaking to experienced officers who have been to thousands of incidents, asking them to change their methods can be difficult.

Alternatives to ‘charging’ young people

An organisation I spoke to that works with the police noted that when the outcome of an interaction is not a caution or criminal charge, there is often frustration on the part of the police that time was wasted. Police officers may be more keen to use different outcomes, such as referrals or ‘out of court disposals’, if they were easier and simpler to complete than a charge or caution.

There is also a lack of knowledge on these alternative outcomes by frontline officers. When speaking to an external agency, they alluded that when ‘out of court disposals’ such as community resolutions were first introduced, they were avoided by police officers due to the belief that they were

² Where police are solely focused on responding to 999 calls, when the danger is already imminent.

³ This is a phrase commonly heard within the Metropolitan Police, an example of language which could be indicative of some of the attitudes within the police force.

complicated and too different to standard systems. Gradually with training and experience, the agency has seen community resolutions now become part of everyday policing.

Wider societal understanding

When interviewing a representative from a third sector organisation who support young victims of violence, they said recruits have on occasion been resistant to learning about trauma informed approaches and ACEs. They were unable to discern whether this was due to an issue in the recruitment process for the programme or the training itself. There may be wider issues at play here as well, with police officers reflecting the priorities that the wider public have towards vulnerable children and young people caught up in crime.

Lack of support for young adults and those excluded from school

Young people between the age of 18-25 have very little support since they are considered in the same category of care and support as adults by most agencies. For example, the Youth Justice System does not support over 18s and the social services in some cases have been using unregulated childcare services from the age 16.⁴ After the age of 18 young people are only likely to receive statutory support that would have been available for children if they are especially vulnerable, have a known disability or learning difficulty. This is especially worrying for young people that were in care or have been excluded from mainstream education.

Exclusions, alternative provision schools and pupil referral units (PRU) can lead to putting children at risk of being involved in crime. Mainstream schools are pressured to exclude or suspend children who cannot conform to their discipline and rigid structures. Children with learning difficulties or special educational needs are much more likely to be excluded.

When speaking to someone from a Violence Reduction Unit they stated that county lines drug dealers had begun waiting outside these locations and said, “County lines are better at identifying and engaging with vulnerable children than the police”.

Recommendations

- There is an urgent need for a continued effort to continue taking a public health approach to reduce violence consisting of multi-agency partnerships.
- Frontline officers need to focus on positively engaging with all children, especially when there is hostility as often this is born from fear and mistrust.
- Increased awareness and practice of Child-Centred Policing (CCP) for all police officers, specifically front-line officers, should be led at in-person training events where this approach can be fully explained, and a conversation can be had about the benefits to police officers, forces and young people involved.
- The word ‘child’ instead of ‘young person’ should be used at all times to refer to anyone under 18.
- The specific needs of girls and young women need to be addressed as a priority in CCP.
- Front line officers need strategies on CCP to ensure that it is understood and applied appropriately, which are reviewed and evaluated frequently using quantitative and qualitative data.
- Agencies that work with the police such as Criminal Prosecution Services and Magistrates also need to employ a child-centred approach.

⁴ This is true up until this year. From October 2023, all care providers and supported accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds need to be registered with the Government and regulated by Ofsted.

- Front-line officers need educating on the role restorative justice has in preventing reoffending by young people. Alternative methods such as community resolutions, referrals or out of court disposals should be championed by all officers when working with young people.
- Wider promotion of CCP, trauma informed approaches and ACEs needs to be aimed at the public.
- Successful projects, such as all the examples above, need to build on existing knowledge and continue being refined and funded. Plans should be made to support these projects and specialist teams which are long-term and fully community embedded.

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Organisations interviewed:

- Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner's Office and Violence Reduction Unit
- Metropolitan Police Service



- Sussex Police
- Kent Police
- Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership
- Merseyside Police
- Greater Manchester Police

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