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This literature review explores the potential of participatory approaches in co-constructing safeguarding policy, particularly in early years education. It emphasizes the importance of including diverse voices—children, families, professionals, and stakeholders (Sherwood Johnson and Mackay, 2020)—in shaping policy, despite the sensitive and complex nature of safeguarding (Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust, 2025). The review critically examines existing literature on co-construction, identifying recurring themes that could inform more inclusive and effective policy development.

Persistent failures in safeguarding practice (Research in Practice, 2025; Croydon Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2024), highlight the urgency of rethinking policy design. Although safeguarding is a legal and moral obligation (NSPCC, 2025; Cocker *et al.*, 2021; UNICEF, no date) current frameworks often fall short due to fragmented systems and a lack of contextual responsiveness (Ball *et al.*, 2024; Phippen, 2025). The concept of safeguarding as a "wicked problem" (White *et al.*, 2015) underscores its complexity and resistance to one-size-fits-all solutions. Scholars argue that co-construction may offer a way to address these challenges by fostering collaboration and contextual understanding.

In Wales, safeguarding legislation such as the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014* provides a strong foundation, yet UK-wide policies remain outdated and disconnected from lived experiences. Despite efforts to promote children's rights, policymaking often prioritizes accountability over relational, child-centred approaches. The review concludes that a more participatory, context-sensitive approach is essential to create safeguarding policies that are both effective and reflective of the realities faced by children and families (Depuy and Defacqz, 2021).

Theme one explores the challenges of power imbalances among stakeholders during the process of co-construction. While co-construction aims to democratise decision-making, research shows that government often retain final authority, limiting genuine participation (Wellstead, Evans and Sapeha's, 2018). Power asymmetries—rooted in differences in knowledge, status and resources—can marginalise non-governmental voices, especially children and families (Heley and Moles, 2012). These dynamics risk reducing participation to a tokenistic gesture (Turnhout *et al.*, 2020; Wellstead, Evans and Sapeha's, 2018). Frameworks like Arnstein's and Hart's ladders of participation help assess the depth of involvement (Varwell, 2022; Rahimi *et al.*, 2023). Facilitation and confidence-building can help mitigate power struggles (Crompton, 2018; Fillingham, Smith and Sealey, 2023). Ultimately, meaningful co-construction requires equitable collaboration, mutual respect and a commitment to valuing lived experience.

Bureaucracy in government-led processes can hinder the flexibility and collaboration needed for effective co-construction (Dupuy and Defacqz, 2022; Sorrentino, Sicilia and Howlett, 2018). Hierarchical structures and siloed working often limit cross-sector engagement. A whole systems approach offers a more effective alternative for addressing complex, multifaceted issues (ADCS, 2025; Fallowfield and Cairns, 2025). While bureaucracy values technical and institutional input, co-construction prioritises lived experience, trust, and open communication (McGann, Wells and Blomkamp, 2021). However, rigid, linear policy models can stifle innovation and responsiveness (Sørensen and Torfing, 2024) . Co-construction, though underused, can bridge gaps between officials and citizens, fostering deeper understanding and more effective solutions. Reducing bureaucracy and promoting participatory frameworks can enhance policy relevance, responsiveness, and long-term impact (Crompton, 2018; Gray, Purdy and Ansari, 2022).

Co-construction has the potential to enhance inclusion and empowerment by ensuring equal representation among stakeholders (Farr, 2017; Fillingham, Smith and Sealey, 2023). Success depends on clear, flexible, and inclusive approaches that accommodate diverse needs and perspectives (Fung, 2015). Research shows that informal engagement methods—like personal connections and open dialogue—can be more inclusive than formal bureaucratic processes, which often limit participation (Wellstead, Evans and Sapeha's, 2018). Empowerment is fostered when individuals feel valued, heard, and capable of influencing decisions (Metz *et al.*, 2022). Strategies such as small group discussions, effective facilitation, and transparent communication build trust and legitimacy (Metz *et al.*, 2022). Ultimately, inclusive co-construction leads to more relevant, accepted, and sustainable policies, especially in complex areas like safeguarding, where diverse voices are essential.

- Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a holistic framework for understanding safeguarding by examining how interconnected systems—family, peers, community, and society—shape children's experiences, risks, and protections over time. It supports a contextual, multiagency approach, recognising that safeguarding must evolve with societal changes and consider both immediate and broader environmental influences (Wroe, 2021; Wilson, Diaz and Usabillaga, 2022).
- Viewing safeguarding through a rights lens ensures children's rights, dignity, and participation are central to policy. Genuine co-construction empowers children, but risks becoming tokenistic without meaningful engagement (Ogle and Vincent, 2022)
- The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 are seen as outdated due to changing family dynamics and safeguarding needs. Critics advocate for a child-centred, participatory approach that includes children's voices. While challenges remain, evidence supports inclusive policymaking that empowers children and reflects their lived experiences through innovative, rights-based models (Aynsley-Green, 2019; ACDS, 2019; Delahunty, 2019).

This review highlights the urgent need to reform safeguarding policy in Wales, revealing a fragmented, bureaucratic system shaped by shifting priorities and power imbalances. While co-construction offers a promising, inclusive alternative, its success depends on addressing structural barriers like unequal power dynamics and limited representation. Without deliberate strategies, co-construction risks becoming tokenistic. The review emphasizes that inclusion, empowerment, and cross-sector collaboration are not optional but essential. When supported by thoughtful facilitation and context-sensitive approaches, co-construction can transform safeguarding policy into a more responsive, rights-based, and participatory process—especially within the Early Years sector—ensuring policies reflect lived experiences and promote meaningful change.

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