



# SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 16TH DECEMBER 2025 • ISSUE 159

## **New report on teen relationship violence - What schools need to know**

The Youth Endowment Fund has released the 2025 "Children, Violence and Vulnerability" report, including Report 2: Violence in Relationships, which draws on responses from nearly 11,000 young people aged 13-17 across England and Wales.

### **Key findings: The reality for teen relationships**

- Of the teenagers surveyed, **28%** said they'd been in a romantic or sexual relationship in the past 12 months.
- Of those, **39%** reported some form of emotional or physical abuse, that's roughly 1 in 10 of all teenagers. This amounts to 390,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales.
- **Among the types of abuse reported:** emotional abuse such as partners checking phones or monitoring locations, criticism of appearance; and more seriously, **15%** said they had experienced physical or sexual abuse, including being pressured or forced into sex, physical harm, or non-consensual sharing of explicit images.
- **The impact is significant:** many reported emotional distress, anxiety or low mood, difficulty sleeping or concentrating, loss of appetite. Over a third said their experiences affected their relationships with friends or family. Importantly, over **20%** said they avoided school or college because of something that happened with their partner.
- **The problem affects both girls and boys.** While some forms of abuse are more often reported by girls, boys also report serious issues such as non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

### **Why this matters for schools**

These findings show that relationship violence, emotional, physical or sexual, is not rare among teens. For many young people, their school life, wellbeing, attendance, and emotional health are being affected by abusive or controlling relationships outside school. This has direct implications for safeguarding, pastoral care, and the overall school environment.

Schools are more than educational institutions, they are community hubs that can play a critical role in identifying risk, supporting vulnerable pupils, providing early intervention, and teaching healthy relationship behaviours.

### **What schools should do - Practical steps and considerations**

Here are some steps your school should consider in light of this report:

- **Review and strengthen Relationships and Sex/Health Education (RSHE)**, ensure that teaching covers healthy vs unhealthy relationships, consent, coercive control, online safety, and how to get help.
- **Build awareness among staff**, pastoral leaders, safeguarding leads, form tutors and welfare staff should be aware of the prevalence and signs of relationship abuse. Regular training and clear referral pathways are vital.
- **Ensure safe, confidential support for pupils**, make sure pupils know how they can talk to a trusted member of staff if they're experiencing problems, and that the school environment supports disclosure without stigma.
- **Collaborate with external support services**, link with local support services (charities, youth services, mental-health providers) to offer help beyond what the school can provide.
- **Promote healthy relationship culture school wide**, embed values of respect, consent, mutual respect, boundaries and respect for personal autonomy into school ethos, assemblies and pupil-led initiatives.

### **Read:**

<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2025/violence-in-relationships/>

## **Hidden but widespread- Economic abuse and what schools need to know**

New data from Surviving Economic Abuse reveals a deeply concerning reality: an estimated **3.9 million children** in the UK are living in households affected by economic abuse, where a parent's current or former partner controls finances and restricts access to vital resources.

What might feel like "private family finances" has in fact become a major safeguarding and wellbeing issue, with serious consequences for children's physical, emotional, and educational wellbeing.

### **What the research found - Key impacts on children and families**

- About **27%** of mothers with children under 18 reported experiencing economic abuse in the last year, underlining how common this problem is.
- Among children in affected households:
  - **14%** had experienced poor mental health because of economic abuse at home.
  - **17%** of families couldn't provide essentials like food, clothing, or other basic needs for their children.
  - **20%** of parents said they felt afraid for their child's safety or wellbeing as a result of the economic control.
- Specific harmful behaviours include stealing children's pocket or birthday money, refusing or unreliably paying child maintenance, withholding benefits, or denying access to financial resources needed for essentials.

The report describes economic abuse as a "dangerous and often hidden form of domestic abuse" but one that can have profound and lasting consequences on children's lives.

### **Why This matters to schools**

For many children, the effects of economic abuse may not be visible but the impact can show up in school life in various ways. Schools need to recognise the possibility that

financial hardship or abuse at home may be affecting a pupil's attendance, wellbeing, concentration, social behaviour, or access to resources (uniforms, school trips, lunch, school supplies, etc.).

**Schools occupy a unique position:** trusted by children and families alike, they can act as early-warning systems, safe places of disclosure, and gateways to support.

### **What schools should do - Practical implications and actions**

Here are some actions schools might consider to support children and families affected by economic abuse:

- **Raise awareness among staff:** Pastoral leads, safeguarding staff, and teachers should understand what economic abuse is, and how it might affect children's behaviour, wellbeing or attendance.
- **Ensure safe, confidential support and referral pathways:** Offer pupils and parents safe routes to talk if they are experiencing financial control or abuse at home (e.g. school welfare lead, safeguarding lead, local support services).
- **Be alert to signs of need:** Children who are repeatedly hungry, lacking uniform/school supplies, missing meals/trips, struggling socially/emotionally, or showing sudden changes – may be living in economically abusive households.
- **Support access to essentials:** Work to ensure children have access to meals, school supplies, uniform subsidies or help, without stigma. Also, signpost families to local support services or charities that help with housing, food, financial advice, or domestic abuse support.
- **Communicate with families sensitively:** Include information about economic abuse in school communications (newsletters, safeguarding policies, parent leaflets) so families understand what support might be available and feel safe to ask for help.
- **Collaborate with community and social services:** Build relationships with local domestic abuse charities, welfare organisations, social services, so the school can refer families when needed, and contribute to a wider safety net for vulnerable children.

### **Read:**

<https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/news/nearly-four-million-children/>

## **What schools need to know - VPN use and Online Safety in the post-age-verification era**

Recent research from Childnet, carried out with support from the UK Safer Internet Centre and Nominet, finds that the widely reported spike in Virtual Private Network (VPN) use after the summer's introduction of age-verification controls is not primarily driven by children. The findings include some nuances that are important for schools to understand, especially given their role in safeguarding and promoting digital safety.

### **What the research found - Key points**

- In a representative survey of 2,018 children aged 8-17 in the UK, **23%** of young people said they started using a VPN in the past three months. That is only slightly higher than the **21%** who said they began using one about a year ago, suggesting the media-reported "surge" cannot be solely attributed to children.
- Among children who use VPNs, the most common reasons given were to protect privacy and improve online safety (**38%**). Other reasons included circumventing parental controls (**16%**) and bypassing school WiFi restrictions (**16%**).
- A smaller proportion (around **10%** of young VPN users, an indicative figure) said they used VPNs to access content "which they are not supposed to see for their age."
- The research authors caution that, although children's VPN use doesn't appear dramatically increased, VPNs remain a "workaround" that may undermine intended protections, meaning continued attention to online safety is needed.

### **What schools could do - Practical considerations and actions**

Schools should review and update their acceptable-use and online-safety policies to address VPN use directly, while also educating pupils about online privacy, how VPNs work, and the risks involved. Staff should encourage open conversations so pupils feel comfortable asking questions about online behaviour without judgement. At the same time, schools need to balance safeguarding with the understanding that some families use VPNs for legitimate privacy reasons. Working closely with parents and carers is essential to ensure consistent online-safety messages are reinforced at home as well as in school. Providing families with clear guidance on privacy tools, filtering options and safe internet habits can help strengthen a shared approach to digital safety.

### **Read:**

<https://www.childnet.com/blog/new-research-from-childnet-shows-that-the-surge-in-vpn-use-following-the-introduction-of-age-verification-in-the-summer-is-not-attributable-to-children/>

## **Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 2 2025**

**Trauma - Tuesday 16th December**

**Spring term 1 2026**

**Knife crime - Tuesday 13th January**

**Neglect - Tuesday 20th January**

**FGM - Tuesday 27th January**

**Eating disorders (Bitesize webinar) - Tuesday 3rd February**

**Children with a family member in prison (Bitesize webinar) - Tuesday 10th February**

### **Reminder:**

**The S4S Safeguarding office will be closed from Friday 19th December and re-open on Monday 5th January 2026. If you have an urgent query during this period, please contact Lauren Jones on 07908 530783 or email [Lauren.Jones@services4schools.org.uk](mailto:Lauren.Jones@services4schools.org.uk) The Safeguarding Update will resume on Tuesday 6th January 2026. Have a great Christmas break and a safe and happy New Year!**

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