



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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What schools need to know about the new government strategy on Freedom from Violence and Abuse

In December 2025 the UK Government published Freedom from Violence and Abuse: a cross-government strategy, a major new policy aimed at halving violence against women and girls over the next decade and shaping long-term prevention activity across society.

This strategy goes beyond law enforcement, calling for a whole-of-society approach that tackles the root causes of abuse including unsafe attitudes, harmful norms and early exposure to violent online content.

What this means for schools

Stronger focus on relationship and healthy behaviour education

Schools are expected to play a central role in prevention by:

- Building on the RSHE curriculum to ensure all pupils learn about healthy relationships, consent, respect and misogyny.
- Helping children recognise and challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours that can escalate into abuse.

The government plans to support this through teacher training and pilot programmes focused on delivering effective lessons and activities on these issues.

Teacher training and resources

The strategy includes funding to support schools in improving delivery:

- A £3 million teacher training fund over two years to help teachers confidently deliver new content.
- Healthy relationships training pilots with external providers to enhance school provision.

Schools will have flexibility in how they deliver this, through in-house lessons, specialist providers, mentoring and whole-school approaches.

Early intervention for harmful behaviour

The plan proposes pilots to tackle harmful sexual behaviours and teen relationship abuse directly, with support for young people displaying concerning behaviours alongside education.

A new helpline for young people concerned about their own behaviour or relationship issues will also be launched to complement school-based work.

Whole-school culture and safeguarding

The strategy encourages schools to integrate learning about positive relationships and combating violence against women and girls across the entire school environment, not just in RSHE lessons. This aligns with broader safeguarding duties to create respectful, safe cultures for all pupils.

Long-term prevention is expected

Policy and commentary around the strategy make it clear that lasting change depends on early prevention of harmful attitudes and behaviours and consistent reinforcement of respect and equality.

How schools can prepare now

- **Audit your current RSHE provision:** Are lessons covering consent, respect, online harms (e.g. image sharing, deepfakes), and healthy relationships in age-appropriate ways?
- **Plan professional development:** Identify training needs for RSHE leads and pastoral staff around these themes ahead of new government support.
- **Embed whole-school messaging:** Use assemblies, culture-building activities and behaviour policies to reinforce respect and challenge misogynistic or abusive language.
- **Review safeguarding policies:** Link strategy themes to your existing Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) duties, including recognising child-on-child abuse and online harms.
- **Engage parents and carers:** Share information on the importance of early conversations about healthy relationships and online behaviour.

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-from-violence-and-abuse-a-cross-government-strategy>

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/vawg-strategy-to-better-protect-children-from-misogyny-and-abuse>

Schools guide to the Youth Endowment Fund's Exploitation and Gangs findings

The latest Children, Violence and Vulnerability 2025 research from the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) reveals stark insights into how criminal exploitation, missing episodes, and gang involvement put pupils at serious risk of violence and harm. Schools play a critical safeguarding and early intervention role, here's what you need to know.

Key findings that affect schools

Many teens are being targeted for criminal exploitation

About 1 in 8 teenagers (12%) in England and Wales reported being approached to sell, transport, or hide drugs, weapons or money in the past year. Around a quarter of those approached went on to do so, which equates to roughly 120,000 13-17 year-olds.

Exploitation overlaps with missing from home and gangs

Going missing, even occasionally, is linked with higher risk of exploitation. Around 11% of teens said they stayed somewhere overnight without permission, and about 4% said this happens regularly.

A small proportion, 2.4%, self-identified as being in a "gang" in the last year (a term the report acknowledges has limitations). But this group accounted for over a third of serious violence requiring medical treatment.

Exploitation and gang involvement dramatically increase violence risk

Teenagers who go missing, are exploited, or involved in gangs are many times more likely to be victims or perpetrators of serious violence than their peers.

Risky behaviours can signal vulnerability

Behaviours like carrying weapons or using class A drugs are far more common among those exploited or gang-linked, but they can be both symptoms and signals of deeper issues.

What schools should watch for

Missing episodes

Pupils who are going missing from home or school frequently may be at heightened risk of being targeted by exploiters. Monitor attendance and unauthorised absences carefully and follow up with safeguarding checks.

Engagement with older peers

Sudden social changes, especially associations with older pupils or out-of-school contacts, can sometimes precede exploitation. Teach staff to spot shifts in behaviour patterns.

Behaviour changes and risk behaviours

Keep an eye out for unusual behaviour like weapon possession, substance use, unexplained money or items, avoidance of adults, or secretive communications. These can be important red flags.

Prevention, support and positive pathways

The report highlights that leaving gang involvement is possible, and that supportive relationships and opportunities matter. Reasons young people gave for stepping away included:

- wanting to avoid trouble
- positive adult influence (teachers, mentors, social workers)
- engagement in sports or creative activities

This highlights the value of strong school support systems, extra-curricular opportunities, and trusted adult relationships.

Practical steps for schools

Strengthen monitoring of attendance and missing episodes

Regularly analyse attendance patterns and follow-up with families and safeguarding teams when concerns appear.

Look beyond stereotype language

Be aware that gang involvement and exploitation do not look the same for every child, risk can be hidden or subtle.

Build trusted adult relationships

Mentoring, coaching, and pastoral support help pupils feel seen and supported, a protective factor against exploitation.

Embed protective education

Ensure RSHE, personal safety, online safety and healthy-relationships lessons include awareness of peer pressure, exploitation tactics, coercion, and how to seek help early.

Multi-agency work is essential

Work closely with local safeguarding partners, police Violence Reduction Units, social workers and community services to share information and coordinate support.

Read:

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

What schools need to know: Care leavers and wellbeing (Coram Report)

A major new analysis from the Coram Institute for Children finds that around one in three young care leavers reports low wellbeing, and overall wellbeing is worsening compared to recent years. This comes from the largest survey of its kind, drawing on responses from around 27,000 children in or leaving care.

Key findings relevant to schools

High levels of low wellbeing after leaving care - About 32% of care leavers report low overall wellbeing, much higher than their peers in the general population, and this increases to nearly half for those with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

Drop in wellbeing once young people leave care - Wellbeing tends to decline with age, with a stark drop-off after young people exit the care system, often linked to feeling less supported, safe or connected.

Loneliness and loss of relationships - Leaving care frequently means losing trusted relationships with adults and peers, and nearly one in five care leavers feels lonely often or always.

Education, training and employment matter - Care leavers who stay engaged in education, training or employment are far more likely to experience better wellbeing, highlighting how crucial school engagement and transition planning are.

Safety and stability are key drivers - Feeling safe and stable in housing, and having access to trusted adults and supportive relationships, are among the strongest influences on wellbeing.

Read: <https://www.coram.org.uk/news/one-in-three-young-care-leavers-low-wellbeing/>

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for 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

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