



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 20TH JANUARY 2026 • ISSUE 162

What schools need to know about gendered online experiences

Recent research from Internet Matters explores how girls and boys experience the online world differently and highlights important insights for schools working to protect children's digital wellbeing. The findings, drawn from the Digital Wellbeing Index (a UK-wide survey of children aged 9-16), show both similarities and differences in how pupils engage with and are affected by online spaces.

1. Boys and girls use the internet in similar ways, but risks differ

- Girls and boys increasingly spend time online in comparable ways, particularly around social media use, though differences remain in some areas (e.g. gaming).
- Both girls and boys generally report positive aspects of being online, such as friendship and creativity.

2. Exposure to online harm affects all children

- Rates of exposure to harmful content, including racist, sexist or homophobic material are now similar for both girls and boys.
- However, girls remain more likely to experience online abuse and harassment, and to report emotional distress linked to harmful content such as sexualised material or unrealistic body images.
- Boys are increasingly reporting distress from unwanted contact or interactions online.

3. Reporting and responses differ between genders

- Girls are more likely to talk to an adult or tell someone when something online worries or upsets them.
- Boys are more likely to take actions themselves within platforms (such as blocking or reporting accounts) to protect themselves online.
- These differences suggest that support and education should be tailored to ensure all children have the skills and confidence to get help and stay safe.

4. Parental perceptions and actions vary

- Parents of girls tend to be more concerned about online harm and take more action (e.g. setting parental controls) compared with parents of boys.
- Some parents may unintentionally normalise experiences such as online harassment for girls, viewing them as "standard" rather than harmful, highlighting a need for improved awareness and parent-school partnership on online safety.

What this means for schools

To support the safety and wellbeing of all pupils in an increasingly digital world, schools should consider:

Strengthening curriculum and teaching

- Ensure online safety is fully embedded in the RSHE and Computing curriculum, covering respectful behaviour, online harassment, sexualised content and emotional responses.
- Provide teaching and discussion opportunities that reflect gendered experiences and help pupils understand how to respond to different risks.

Supporting pupils' emotional responses

- Create safe spaces where pupils feel confident to talk about online harm and understand who to approach for help.
- Regularly revisit how pupils can report concerns, both to trusted adults and through platform reporting tools.

Engaging parents and carers

- Share insights from research with families to raise awareness of gendered risks and harms online.
- Provide practical guidance (e.g. parental controls, conversation starters) so parents can reinforce safe behaviours at home.
- Work together to challenge any narrative that online harassment is "normal" or should be tolerated.

Tailored and responsive safeguarding

- Recognise that different children may experience the online world differently and adapt support accordingly.
- Encourage pupils to speak up early about concerns and ensure reporting channels are trusted, visible and age-appropriate.

Read:

<https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/girls-boys-online-experiences-gender-research-briefing/>

What schools need to know about supporting pupil anxiety

Anxiety is a normal emotional response to stress and uncertainty, but when it becomes frequent or intense it can begin to affect pupils' day-to-day life, learning, attendance, and wellbeing. Schools have a vital role in helping young people understand and manage anxiety, reduce stigma, and ensure pupils feel listened to and supported. The Let's Talk About Anxiety animation and teacher toolkit from Mentally Healthy Schools/Anna Freud Centre is a free evidence-informed resource designed to support this work.

What the resource offers

- A short animated film that helps pupils aged 11-13 understand anxiety as a normal emotion and that everyone experiences it differently.
- Lesson and assembly materials, including PowerPoint, worksheets, and activities that can be used in PSHE, RSHE, tutor time, or assemblies.
- Teacher guidance on supporting pupils who are anxious, including strategies to facilitate sensitive conversations.

- Parent/carer guidance, which enables school and home to reinforce shared messages about anxiety and support.

The animation and toolkit normalise anxiety, help pupils understand how it can affect thoughts, feelings and the body, and offer practical coping strategies such as breathing techniques, positive self-talk and identifying early signs of stress.

Read:

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/resources/lets-talk-about-anxiety-animation-and-teacher-toolkit/>

What schools need to know about the Breck Foundation

The Breck Foundation is a UK-based charity dedicated to protecting children and young people from online grooming, exploitation and digital harm. It was established in 2014 following the tragic case of Breck Bednar, a 14-year-old who was groomed and murdered by someone he met online. The Foundation's mission is to ensure this painful experience helps safeguard future generations through education, empowerment, and prevention.

Why the Breck Foundation matters for schools

- **Online safety risks are increasing:** With the vast majority of children online, the digital world presents evolving dangers from unregulated platforms and predators. The Foundation emphasises the urgent need to strengthen children's digital resilience so they can identify and respond to online risks.
- **Grooming and exploitation are not isolated issues:** The Foundation's work highlights that any child, regardless of background or vulnerability, may be targeted online, making education and awareness essential components of safeguarding practice.

Key resources and support for schools

1. Speaker sessions and workshops

The Foundation delivers powerful online safety presentations tailored to children, young people, parents, governors and school staff. These sessions use Breck's story as a learning tool to make online risks, such as grooming and exploitation, relatable and understandable.

Presentations include:

- How to recognise grooming and dangerous behaviour
- What safe behaviour looks like online
- How and where to report concerns
- They are available for pupils from Key Stage 1 through to post-16, as well as for adults within the school community.

2. Satellite presentations on specific themes

In addition to core talks, the Foundation has developed age-appropriate satellite presentations covering:

- Fake news and misinformation
- Digital citizenship and respectful online behaviour
- Wellbeing and mental health online
- These can be used to deepen understanding around important digital safety topics.

3. Teacher and parent resources

The charity offers downloadable tools and lesson materials to help maintain online safety conversations in the classroom and at home. This includes guidance on extending learning after presentations and practical ways to empower pupils and families.

What schools can do

Integrate Breck Foundation resources with school online safety planning

Use these sessions alongside your existing online safety curriculum and approaches (e.g. RSHE, Computing) to reinforce key messages and help pupils translate learning into behaviour.

Engage parents and carers

Invite parents to attend Breck presentations or share resources so that safety messages are consistent between home and school.

Tailor support to need

Use feedback from pupils, staff or incidents to decide which satellite topics or age groups would benefit most from additional awareness.

Embed reporting pathways

Ensure pupils are aware of how to raise concerns at school and online platforms, and that staff are confident responding to disclosures or signs of grooming.

Impact in schools

Feedback from schools and young people shows that Breck Foundation sessions:

- Increase pupils' awareness of grooming and online dangers
- Improve confidence in spotting risky situations
- Help children understand how to stay safer online
- For example, surveys after school talks found that over 90% of pupils felt more confident identifying and responding to online risk after engagement with the Foundation's session

Read:

<https://www.breckfoundation.org/>

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Spring term 1 2026

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

Dr Sandra Wiseman

S4S Safeguarding Lead/Specialist

Sandra.Wiseman@services4schools.org.uk

Mobile: 07786 582266