



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Helping children have a healthier relationship with phones and social media: What schools need to know

The UK Government has launched a major initiative aimed at improving children's relationship with mobile phones and social media, recognising the impact that excessive device use can have on wellbeing and learning.

Government consultation and national discussion

On 19th January 2026, the Department for Education and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology published plans to drive action that supports children's healthy engagement with technology. This includes a national consultation seeking views from parents, young people and organisations on how best to promote positive digital wellbeing. Schools are encouraged to be part of the national conversation about the effects of mobile phones and social media on children's lives and will see outcomes from this consultation shared later in the year.

Stronger expectations on mobile phones in schools

A key aspect of the announcement focuses on mobile phones in schools:

- **Phone-free default:** Mobile phones should not be accessible to pupils during lessons, break times, lunchtime or between lessons.
- **Ofsted will check mobile phone policies** and how effectively they're enforced in inspections.
- **Guidance makes clear that staff should model good practice** by avoiding personal phone use in front of pupils.

These expectations align with updated Department for Education guidance on mobile phones in schools, which emphasises a consistent, clear and communicated policy that supports learning, behaviour and wellbeing.

Digital wellbeing and online safety

The Government is also exploring broader measures to enhance online safety and promote healthy digital habits:

- **Reviewing whether the minimum age for social media use should be raised** and considering a ban for under-16s.
- **Looking at ways to improve age verification** and reduce addictive design features (like infinite scrolling).
- **Supporting families with evidence-based** screen time guidance.

These proposals build on existing online safety legislation (such as the Online Safety Act) and broader calls for stronger child protection in the digital world.

What this means for your school

Practical steps for schools now include:

- Reviewing and, if necessary, strengthening your mobile phone policy so it results in a genuinely phone-free environment during the school day.
- Communicating clearly with pupils, parents and staff about expectations and the reasons behind them.
- Using Ofsted inspection cycles as an opportunity to check that policy, culture and practice are aligned.
- Supporting pupils with digital wellbeing education, helping them understand not only how to stay safe online but why digital balance matters.

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-action-to-improve-childrens-relationship-with-mobile-phones-and-social-media>

Domestic abuse and children: What schools need to know

A new joint inspection report from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire & Rescue Services and HM Inspectorate of Probation has highlighted serious concerns about how children affected by domestic abuse are being recognised and supported and why this matters for schools.

Key findings from the National Inspection

- Children are too often not recognised as victims in their own right, despite the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 stating that children who see, hear or experience domestic abuse are victims of the abuse themselves.
- Inspection work across multiple local areas found inconsistencies in identification, risk assessment and support for affected children by agencies such as police, health, social care and education partners.
- In some areas, responses remain adult-focused, failing to centre children's experiences and needs, meaning children may not receive timely or tailored support.

What this means for schools

Schools are often one of the first places children show the effects of domestic abuse through changes in behaviour, attendance, emotional wellbeing and learning engagement.

It's critical that schools:

1. **Recognise the impact on children:** Domestic abuse exposure is a safeguarding issue seeing, hearing or living with abuse can affect a child's safety, emotional wellbeing and ability to learn.
2. **Actively identify signs of domestic abuse:** Staff need confidence in recognising the less visible signs, such as anxiety, withdrawal, unexplained absence, emotional regulation difficulties or sudden changes in behaviour.

3. Use school safeguarding pathways: Appropriate recording, assessment and referral are essential. Information must be shared effectively with pastoral leads and, where required, with external agencies. Schools should reference their local safeguarding arrangements and make early help referrals when appropriate.

4. Work as part of multi-agency partnerships: Effective support depends on collaboration with children's services, health and police. Schools should contribute to multi-agency discussions, especially where there's concern about ongoing domestic harm.

5. Support the whole child: For children affected by domestic abuse, schools can offer stable routines, nurture, therapeutic support and access to counselling or wellbeing activities.

Why this matters

The inspection highlights that despite statutory recognition, practice must improve so that children's experiences of domestic abuse are consistently identified, understood and responded to, not only as witnesses but as victims with their own needs for protection and support.

By strengthening awareness, safeguarding practice and multi-agency working, schools can play a vital role in protecting children and helping them to thrive despite adversity.

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/children-not-always-recognised-as-domestic-abuse-victims-in-their-own-right-inspectorates-warn>

What schools need to know: New Youth Endowment Fund review on young people and violence

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) has just published the first UK systematic review of qualitative research exploring children and young people's own accounts of their involvement in, or risk of, serious violence. This research, based on insights from young people themselves, sheds light on why young people become involved in violence and how schools and communities can better support prevention and positive change.

What the review found

The review, carried out by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, brings together 25 years of UK research involving young people aged 10-24 to understand:

1. Difficult lives and limited opportunities: Many young people involved in violence describe experiences of trauma, poverty, exclusion from school and limited positive opportunities. These challenges can leave them feeling disconnected, with violence sometimes seen as a way to express anger, boredom or unfairness.

2. Hypermasculinity and identity pressures: Some young people, particularly marginalised boys but also girls in certain contexts, described violence as linked to building status, identity or a sense of belonging in peer groups.

3. Financial incentives: For some, involvement in violence is connected to making money quickly when legitimate opportunities feel unavailable.

4. Fluidity between "at risk" and "involved": The review highlights that young people don't always fit neatly into categories like "at risk" or "actively involved", these states can shift depending on context, such as being with unsupervised peers versus in structured settings like school.

5. Moving away from violence takes time: Desistance from violence is rarely a single event. It's usually a gradual process connected to maturing identity, supportive relationships and positive changes in community environments.

What this means for schools

♦ **Recognising complexity:** Violence should not be seen simply as "bad behaviour." The review emphasises the complex social and emotional factors that can drive young people towards harmful activities, including school exclusion, trauma and lack of structured opportunities. Understanding these drivers can help schools approach behaviour and safeguarding with more nuance.

♦ **Importance of inclusion:** Because exclusion and lack of connection are recurring themes, schools play a vital role in creating environments where all pupils feel supported, engaged and valued, reducing the appeal of harmful peer groups.

♦ **Structured environments matter:** The finding that risk can reduce in structured, supervised settings like school reinforces the importance of consistent routines, positive adult relationships, and engagement opportunities.

♦ **Value of supportive relationships:** Desistance is tied to supportive relationships. Schools through mentoring, pastoral care, consistent safeguarding, and trusted adult presence, can be critical in helping young people build the connections that support positive change.

♦ **Listening to young people:** The review was shaped by direct accounts from young people, reaffirming that listening to pupil voice, formally and informally, is essential to understanding their lives and needs.

Read:

<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/insights-from-yefs-first-systematic-review-of-uk-qualitative-research/>

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Spring term 1 2026

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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