

SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 3RD MARCH 2026 • ISSUE 167



Child Sexual Abuse: A growing and complex threat

What schools must know

Recent policing leaders' warning highlights escalating risks and safeguarding responsibilities. Child sexual abuse in the UK is not only increasing in scale but also becoming more severe, more complex and more accessible, largely due to the way technology is being misused by offenders. This warning comes from national policing leads following the latest analysis of law enforcement activity and threats.

For schools and safeguarding leads, this message is crucial: the digital environment is changing how abuse happens, how children are targeted, and how we must respond.

1. The changing landscape of Child Sexual Abuse

- **Severity and complexity rising:** Despite unprecedented policing efforts, child sexual abuse threats have intensified in their nature and reach.
- **Online platforms and tech tools:** Offenders are using social media, encrypted apps, and generative AI to contact, coerce and exploit children, often in ways that are harder to detect and disrupt.
- **Accessibility on clear web:** Abuse material and harmful contact isn't confined to the "dark web"; it can be found or shared on mainstream platforms.

This shift means children's online experiences are not just about screen time or inappropriate content, they may involve direct abuse, grooming, coercion or exposure to harmful material.

2. What this means for schools

Schools are uniquely placed to protect children and build resilience:

• Increase digital awareness

- **Understand how pupils use technology:** Including social apps, messaging, livestreaming, gaming platforms and AI tools. Digital safeguarding policies need to go beyond blocking sites to recognise how online environments are misused.

• Embed safety education

- **Support pupils with age-appropriate learning** about healthy relationships, online boundaries, consent, exploitation awareness and reporting mechanisms.

• Spot the signs early

- **Changes in behaviour, secrecy around devices,** sudden distress after online activity, or unusual contact with adults/peers could signal hidden abuse.

• Reinforce safeguarding processes

• Review Online Safety policies

- Regularly update acceptable use policies and filtering practices to reflect current risks and technologies.

• Strengthen partnerships

- Work closely with parents, local safeguarding partners and tech safety initiatives. Share trends and concerns so all adults around a child are informed and vigilant.

• Encourage reporting

- Make sure pupils, staff and families know how to report concerns safely and confidentially, and that they trust the school's safeguarding response.

4. A shared community response

Policing leads emphasise that law enforcement alone cannot protect children, safeguarding must be a societal effort involving schools, families, technology companies, children's services, charities and communities.

Schools can help lead this response by:

- Championing multi-agency safeguarding action
- Embedding trauma-informed support for children impacted by harm
- Advocating for policies that hold online platforms accountable

Read:

<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/child-sexual-abuse-is-increasing-in-severity-complexity-and-accessibility-say-policing-leads>

Understanding Youth Violence: What schools need to know

Research in Practice podcast explores youth violence beyond punishment and risk.

Youth violence isn't just an isolated behaviour problem, it reflects complex social, community and developmental factors. A new Research in Practice podcast episode explores youth violence through a public health lens, emphasising prevention, early support and working in partnership with young people themselves.

What is a Public Health approach to Youth Violence?

Instead of seeing violence solely as individual delinquency, a public health view:

- Looks at population, level risk and protective factors.
- Focuses on prevention, not just response.
- Recognises that experiences in family, school and community all influence outcomes.

This framing shifts thinking from "Which child is dangerous?" to "What environments support safety and wellbeing?" a valuable perspective for schools.

Listening to Young People Matters

The podcast emphasises the importance of youth voice and lived experience in shaping

responses to violence, rather than adults assuming solutions.

Why this matters for schools:

- Pupils often understand risk dynamics better than adults realise.
- Engaging children in shaping school safety initiatives builds trust and relevancy.
- Youth-led conversations can reveal underlying issues like exclusion, belonging, or conflict triggers.

What schools can do: Key actions

1. Cultivate a supportive school climate

A positive environment reduces risk factors linked to youth violence, such as:

- Poor peer relationships
- Lack of teacher support
- Feeling unsafe or unheard

School culture matters: children who feel respected, connected and seen are less likely to become involved in violent incidents.

2. Strengthen Early Support and prevention

Prevention isn't just about reacting after incidents, it's about early engagement:

- Anti-bullying programmes that build social skills
- Restorative approaches to conflict
- Mentoring or counselling for pupils with emotional or behavioural needs

These support resilience and reduce escalation. Evidence from youth crime prevention research also highlights evidence-informed programmes as more effective than punitive responses alone.

3. Partner across services

Youth violence is rarely confined to school walls, it is shaped by family, neighbourhood, community safety, health services and youth opportunities.

A public health approach urges schools to work with:

- Local safeguarding partners
- Youth services
- Community violence reduction teams
- Police and health agencies

This holistic network can tackle root causes such as adverse experiences or exclusion from education.

4. Embed listening into practice

Actively engage pupils in:

- Safety discussions and surveys
- Youth councils or forums
- Peer support roles

Hear what young people identify as risks and protective factors – and reflect these in policy and practice.

Read:

<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/understanding-youth-violence/>

Spotting trauma in children (and adults): What schools need to know

Trauma isn't just a one-off event, especially when it's repeated or linked to experiences like domestic abuse, neglect or painful relationships, it can significantly affect a child's development, behaviour and ability to learn. Understanding the signs of trauma helps schools respond with compassion and support rather than misinterpretation of behaviour.

What trauma can look like in children

Children exposed to ongoing fear, threat or distress may show a range of reactions that affect school life. Some key indicators include:

- **Emotional changes:** Heightened anxiety, fearfulness or worry
- **Sleep issues:** Nightmares or trouble settling
- **Concentration difficulties:** Struggles with focus or learning
- **Behaviour shifts:** Increased aggression, hyper-reactivity or withdrawal
- **Relationship challenges:** Trouble forming or keeping friendships
- **Regressive behaviours:** Acting younger than their age as a survival response

These behaviours often stem from the nervous system being stuck in a survival (fight/flight/freeze) mode, making emotion regulation and self-control harder. Labelling these behaviours as "naughty" risks missing the trauma underneath.

Read:

<https://forbysake.org.uk/news/2026/02/11/spotting-trauma-in-children-and-adults/>

Spring term 2 - 5-minute 'bitesize' and audio version safeguarding refresher videos

Child modern slavery - Tuesday 3rd March

Children missing from home or care - Tuesday 10th March

Child abduction and community safety incidents - Tuesday 17th March

Faith based abuse - Tuesday 24th March

To make the most of your brief all-staff safeguarding slot, you may wish to use one of my short 'bite-size' safeguarding videos or audio recordings, alongside a discussion-prompt slide. This approach helps keep safeguarding firmly in focus during those valuable five minutes at the start of your staff briefing.

Dr Sandra Wiseman

S4S Safeguarding Lead/Specialist

Sandra.Wiseman@services4schools.org.uk Mobile: 07786 582266