SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 10TH MARCH 2026 • ISSUE 168

📱 Molly vs The Machines: What schools need to know about online safety

A new Channel 4 documentary, Molly vs The Machines, highlights the serious safeguarding risks children can face online and the powerful influence of social media algorithms on young people's wellbeing. The film tells the story of Molly Russell, a 14-year-old from London who died in 2017 after being exposed to large amounts of harmful online content linked to depression and self-harm.

The documentary follows Molly's father, Ian Russell, and his campaign for stronger online safety protections, while exploring how technology companies' algorithms can push increasingly harmful content to vulnerable users. For schools and safeguarding leads, the film offers a powerful reminder of the importance of digital safeguarding and early intervention.

⚠️ **The role of algorithms** - One of the central themes of the documentary is how social media platforms can recommend and amplify harmful content through algorithms designed to maximise engagement.

In Molly's case, investigations after her death found she had viewed hundreds of posts linked to self-harm, suicide and eating disorders. This raises important questions about how easily young people can become exposed to damaging material online.

🧠 **Impact on children and young people** - The documentary highlights how online content can affect young people's:

- **Mental health and self-esteem**
- **Perception of normal behaviour**
- **Sense of isolation or hopelessness**

Even when children appear outwardly well, they may be struggling privately with what they encounter online.

🏫 **What schools should be aware of** - Schools play a crucial role in identifying and responding to online safeguarding risks. Staff should be alert to:

- **Changes in mood, behaviour or friendship groups**
- **Withdrawal from activities or sudden anxiety**
- **Conversations about self-harm, body image or online communities**

It is also important that concerns about harmful online content are recorded and shared through safeguarding systems where appropriate.

🚦 **Supporting digital safety education** - Schools can support pupils by:

- **Embedding online safety and digital resilience within PSHE and safeguarding education**
- **Encouraging open discussions about social media pressures**
- **Helping pupils understand how algorithms and targeted content work**
- **Promoting trusted reporting routes if pupils encounter harmful material online**

🛡️ **Key safeguarding message**

Molly vs The Machines is a stark reminder that safeguarding today extends beyond the physical world. As children increasingly navigate online spaces independently, schools, families and technology companies all share responsibility for ensuring those environments are safe.

Watch:
https://www.channel4.com/programmes/molly-vs-the-machines

📱 TikTok and online safety: What schools need to know

Recent reporting has highlighted an important debate about online safety and children's protection on social media platforms. TikTok has confirmed it will not introduce end-to-end encryption for its direct messaging service, arguing that such technology could make it harder to detect harmful behaviour and protect users. For schools and safeguarding leads, this development raises important questions about how platforms balance privacy with child protection and what it means for young people who use social media.

🔐 **What Is end-to-end encryption?** - End-to-end encryption is a technology used by many messaging apps where only the sender and recipient can read the messages. Even the platform itself cannot access the content. While this can improve privacy, it also means platforms may struggle to identify:

- **Child sexual exploitation**
- **Grooming behaviour**
- **Harmful or illegal content shared in messages**

TikTok has argued that keeping messages accessible to moderation systems allows it to detect and respond to abuse more effectively.

⚠️ **Why this matters for safeguarding** - Social media remains a significant safeguarding risk environment for children and young people. Platforms use algorithms and messaging tools that can expose pupils to risks such as:

- **Online grooming**
- **Sexual exploitation**
- **Bullying or coercive behaviour**
- **Harmful or distressing content**

The debate around encryption highlights the ongoing challenge of protecting young people online while maintaining privacy rights.

🏫 **What schools should be aware of** - Schools should recognise that pupils may be using multiple messaging platforms and may not fully understand the risks associated with private messaging features. Safeguarding leads should:

- **Remind pupils about safe communication online**
- **Reinforce reporting routes if something online makes them feel unsafe**
- **Be aware that harmful interactions often take place in private messages rather than public posts**

Staff should also continue to record concerns about online activity through the school's safeguarding systems where appropriate.

🚦 **Supporting digital resilience** - Schools can help protect pupils by:

- **Embedding online safety education within PSHE and safeguarding curricula**
- **Teaching pupils about privacy settings and digital footprints**
- **Encouraging open conversations about social media use and pressures**

Read:
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly2m5e5ke4o

🎬 Helping children understand family court: What schools need to know

A new animated film released by Cafcass aims to support children and young people who are involved in family court proceedings, helping them understand what will happen and who will support them during the process. For schools, this resource is a useful reminder that many pupils may be navigating complex family situations and court processes, which can affect their wellbeing, behaviour and engagement with learning.

🙋⚖️ **What the film explains**

The animation, titled "Meeting your Cafcass Worker", helps children understand what happens when they first meet a Family Court Adviser and reassures them that it is okay to feel worried or unsure. It encourages children to:

- **think about their wishes and feelings**
- **feel confident speaking with their Cafcass worker**
- **understand that professionals are there to support them and represent their voice in court decisions.**

The film is part of a wider "Taking me seriously" series, designed to explain family court processes in a child-friendly way.

🗣️ **Children's voices at the centre**

Cafcass works with children involved in family court cases to ensure that their views, experiences and welfare are central to decisions about their lives. The animation was developed with young people from the Family Justice Young People's Board, who have lived experience of family court proceedings. Their voices help make the content authentic and relatable for children currently going through similar situations.

🏫 **What schools should be aware of**

Schools may support children who are:

- **experiencing parental separation or high conflict**
- **involved in private law proceedings (e.g. contact or living arrangements)**
- **subject to public law proceedings such as care orders.**

These situations can affect a child's emotional safety, concentration and behaviour in school.

Read:
https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/new-animated-film-seeks-help-children-young-people-who-are-involved-family-court-proceedings

🧭 What is contextual safeguarding?

Contextual safeguarding recognises that many risks to children occur beyond the family environment. These risks can arise in a range of settings, including:

- 👥 Peer groups
- 🏫 Schools and education settings
- 🌆 Neighbourhoods and public spaces
- 📱 Online environments

Understanding these contexts helps professionals identify where children may experience harm such as exploitation, bullying, sexual harassment, or violence.

Listen to podcast:
https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2026/march/podcast-contextual-safeguarding?utm_campaign=20260309_KIS_CASPAR_March09&utm_content=Podcast%3A%20An%20introduction%20to%20contextual%20safeguarding&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Adestra

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

Children missing from home or care -Tuesday 10th March
Child abduction and community safety incidents - Tuesday 17th March
Faith based abuse - Tuesday 24th March

Summer term 1 - 5-minute 'bitesize' and audio version safeguarding refresher videos

Forced marriage - Tuesday 21st April
Private fostering - Tuesday 28th April
Homelessness - Tuesday 5th May
Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 12th May
Identifying young carers in school -Tuesday 19th May

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