



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Online misogyny: What schools need to know

Barnardo's has recently published significant new research exploring the impact of online misogyny on children and young people's attitudes and behaviours. The findings highlight a growing safeguarding concern for schools, with harmful online content increasingly shaping how young people view themselves, others and relationships.

Why this matters

Misogyny is not a new issue, but the way children and young people encounter it has changed dramatically. Social media platforms, online influencers, group chats, gaming environments and algorithm-driven content can expose children to harmful messages about women, girls and masculinity on a daily basis. Barnardo's warns that these attitudes are becoming normalised for many young people and are increasingly influencing behaviour both online and offline.

What the research found

Barnardo's surveyed 4,000 young people aged 13-20 across the UK. Key findings included:

- **Around two-thirds of young people reported seeing harmful gender stereotypes or expectations online**
- **One in four girls reported being called degrading names online**
- **Nearly one in five girls reported receiving repeated unwanted messages after asking someone to stop or after ignoring them**
- **One in seven young people aged 13-15 had been asked to send a nude image**
- **A quarter of respondents reported seeing intimate images that had been shared without the original person's consent**
- **More than half of boys reported feeling pressure to act tough and hide their emotions**
- **Over one in five boys said their friends would not support them if they challenged sexist comments**

These findings suggest that misogyny affects both girls and boys, although often in different ways. Girls are more likely to experience harassment, intimidation and victim-blaming, while boys may feel pressure to conform to harmful expectations around masculinity and peer acceptance.

What schools may be seeing

Schools may notice:

- **Increased use of sexist language or derogatory comments**
- **Child-on-child sexual harassment**
- **Disrespectful attitudes towards female pupils or staff**
- **Pressure on boys to conform to stereotypical ideas of masculinity**
- **Sharing of harmful online content, including influencer material promoting misogynistic views**
- **Issues linked to nude image sharing, coercion and online sexual harassment**
- **Reduced willingness among pupils to challenge inappropriate behaviour**

Research involving teachers has also found widespread concern that online misogyny is influencing pupil behaviour, relationships and attitudes within schools.

What schools can do

- 1. Create opportunities for discussion** - Provide safe spaces where pupils can explore topics such as respect, consent, healthy relationships, online influences and gender stereotypes.
- 2. Strengthen RSHE provision** - Ensure Relationships, Sex and Health Education reflects the realities of children's online experiences, including misogyny, online harassment, pornography, image sharing and respectful relationships.
- 3. Challenge harmful language** - Low-level sexist comments, "banter" and gender-based insults should never be dismissed. Consistent challenge helps prevent harmful attitudes becoming normalised.
- 4. Develop critical thinking** - Support pupils to recognise manipulation, misinformation, harmful influencers and algorithm-driven content. Encourage questioning of online messages and stereotypes.
- 5. Support boys as well as girls** - Effective prevention work should help boys explore healthy masculinity, emotional wellbeing, empathy and positive relationships.
- 6. Engage parents and carers** - Many parents may be unaware of the content their children encounter online. Providing guidance and raising awareness can help strengthen protective factors at home.

Read:
<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/impact-online-misogyny-children-and-young-peoples-attitudes-and-behaviours>

Online harms and child health: What schools need to know

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) has recently published a briefing highlighting growing concerns from paediatricians about the impact of online harms on children's health, wellbeing and development. The report reinforces what many schools are already seeing: the effects of harmful online experiences are increasingly presenting in classrooms, safeguarding records and pupil wellbeing concerns.

Why this matters

According to the RCPCH, paediatricians are reporting that online harms are no longer confined to the digital world. Children and young people are presenting with emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties linked to their online experiences, including exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, misinformation, unrealistic body image expectations and excessive social media use.

The report warns that many digital platforms have not been designed with children's safety, development and wellbeing as their primary consideration. As a result, children are often exposed to risks that can have a direct impact on their health and welfare.

What schools may be seeing

Schools may notice:

- **Increased anxiety, low mood and emotional distress**
- **Sleep difficulties affecting attendance, concentration and behaviour**
- **Cyberbullying and online peer conflict spilling into school**
- **Exposure to harmful content, including self-harm, eating disorders, pornography and violent material**
- **Concerns linked to body image and self-esteem**
- **Misinformation and conspiracy theories influencing attitudes and behaviour**
- **Online grooming, coercion and exploitation risks**
- **Difficulties managing relationships due to social media pressures**

Many of these issues may not initially present as online safety concerns. Instead, they may appear as safeguarding concerns, attendance issues, behavioural changes, friendship difficulties or deteriorating mental health.

The importance of professional curiosity

The report highlights the need for professionals working with children to routinely consider whether online experiences could be contributing to presenting concerns.

When children experience:

- **Anxiety or low mood**
- **Sleep disruption**
- **Changes in behaviour**
- **Social withdrawal**
- **Friendship difficulties**
- **Self-esteem concerns**

staff should consider whether online activity, social media use or exposure to harmful content may be a contributing factor.

What schools can do

Strengthen Online Safety Education. Ensure pupils receive regular, age-appropriate teaching about:

- **Safe online relationships**
- **Harmful content**
- **Cyberbullying**
- **Consent and image sharing**
- **Misinformation and disinformation**
- **Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies**
- **Digital resilience and critical thinking**

Listen to children's experiences - Create opportunities for pupils to discuss their online lives openly and safely. Children are often more willing to disclose concerns when trusted adults demonstrate genuine interest in their online experiences.

Support parents and carers - Many parents feel overwhelmed by the pace of technological change. Schools can help by sharing guidance, signposting resources and encouraging open conversations about online activity at home.

Recognise vulnerable groups - Some children may be at increased risk online, including those with SEND, mental health needs, social isolation, previous safeguarding concerns or additional vulnerabilities. These children may require enhanced support and monitoring.

Review safeguarding systems - Ensure safeguarding policies, online safety procedures and staff training reflect current online risks and emerging technologies. Staff should understand how online harms can present and know how concerns should be reported and managed.

Read:
https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2026-05/OnlineHarms2026_Quick-read.pdf

Read:
<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/2026-05/childrens-doctors-increasingly-treating-harms-associated-social-media>

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

FCM - Tuesday 9th June
CCE and serious violence - Tuesday 16th June
CSE - Tuesday 23rd June
Domestic abuse - Tuesday 30th June
Radicalisation and extremism - Tuesday 7th July
Cybercrime - Tuesday 14th July

KCSIE 2026 - Date to be confirmed

Dr Sandra Wiseman
S4S Safeguarding Lead/Specialist
Sandra.Wiseman@services4schools.org.uk
Mobile: 07786 582266