SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Online safety and teenagers: Why schools must move beyond monitoring

What schools need to know about supporting safe digital independence

For many years, online safety strategies focused heavily on filtering, monitoring and parental controls. While these remain important protective measures, they are no longer enough on their own, particularly for teenagers.

Today's adolescents live much of their social, emotional and educational lives online. They communicate through private messaging apps, gaming platforms, social media, disappearing messages, AI-powered tools and online communities that many adults may never have used. As a result, safeguarding teenagers online is becoming less about control and more about developing digital judgement, critical thinking and resilience.This presents an important challenge for schools.

The changing nature of online risk

Teenagers are naturally seeking greater independence. When young people feel excessively monitored, they may simply move their activity elsewhere by creating secondary accounts, using VPNs, deleting histories or moving conversations to platforms beyond adult visibility.

At the same time, online risks continue to evolve. Young people are increasingly exposed to:

- **Online scams and phishing attempts**
- **Sextortion and coercion**
- **Account hacking**
- **Online grooming and exploitation**
- **Misinformation and disinformation**
- **Harmful online communities**
- **AI-enabled manipulation and deception**
- **Cyberbullying and child-on-child abuse**
- **Financial fraud through gaming and social media platforms**

Many of these threats rely not on technical expertise but on emotional manipulation.

What this means for schools

The most effective safeguarding approach is no longer simply preventing access to harmful content. Schools must also help young people recognise manipulation, coercion and risk when they encounter it.

This aligns closely with the principles within Keeping Children Safe in Education, which emphasise preventative education, critical thinking and helping children develop the knowledge and skills needed to stay safe both online and offline. Schools should be teaching pupils to pause and question:

- **Why is someone pressuring me to act quickly?**
- **Why does this message feel urgent?**
- **What information is this person trying to obtain?**
- **Does this interaction feel manipulative?**
- **Would I feel comfortable if this conversation became public?**

Developing these "digital safeguarding reflexes" can significantly reduce vulnerability to exploitation and online harm.

The importance of a speak-up culture

One of the most significant messages for schools is that young people must feel able to report mistakes without fear of punishment.

Research and practice consistently show that children are more likely to seek help when they know they will be listened to rather than judged. A pupil who clicks a scam link, shares an image, communicates with the wrong person or makes an error online needs support and guidance.

If every mistake results in blame, sanctions or removal of all online access, children may become less likely to disclose future concerns. Instead, they may conceal issues until risks escalate. Schools should therefore ensure:

- **Trusted adults are visible and accessible**
- **Reporting systems are simple and well understood**
- **Online safety education includes discussion of mistakes and recovery**
- **Staff respond calmly and professionally to disclosures**
- **Safeguarding messages focus on support rather than fear**

Emerging risks schools should be discussing

AI and manipulation - Artificial intelligence is increasingly being used to generate convincing messages, fake images and persuasive content. Young people may struggle to distinguish genuine communication from AI-generated manipulation.

Schools should incorporate AI literacy into online safety education and help pupils understand that not everything they see, hear or read online is authentic.

Gaming communities - Many safeguarding concerns arise not through social media but through gaming platforms and associated communication channels. These spaces may expose young people to scams, grooming, extremist content, inappropriate conversations or financial exploitation.

Oversharing and digital footprints - Young people often underestimate how long online content can remain accessible. Personal information, photographs, locations and routines can all be exploited by malicious individuals. Schools should continue to emphasise privacy settings, digital footprints and responsible sharing.

Practical questions for DSLs and school leaders

Schools may wish to consider:

- **Does our online safety curriculum focus on critical thinking as well as technical safety?**
- **Are we teaching pupils how manipulation works?**
- **Do pupils know how to report online concerns?**
- **Are staff confident in responding to emerging online risks?**
- **Have we updated training to include AI-related safeguarding concerns?**
- **Do pupils feel safe discussing mistakes they have made online?**
- **Is our filtering and monitoring strategy balanced with education and prevention?**

Key message

As technology evolves, schools that successfully combine effective filtering and monitoring with high-quality preventative education, trusted relationships and a strong safeguarding culture will be best placed to protect children from harm. In safeguarding terms, the question is no longer simply "How do we stop children accessing risk?" but "How do we prepare children to recognise and respond to risk when they encounter it?"

Read:
https://www.bitdefender.com/en-us/blog/hotforsecurity/how-to-keep-teens-safe-online?cid=soc%7Cc%7Ctw%7Ch4sfam&twclid=2l4zgdlf3xempw9ua3onoxs05h

When trauma is hidden behind autism: What schools need to know

For years, schools have worked hard to improve understanding of autism. Staff are increasingly aware of sensory differences, communication needs, executive functioning difficulties and the importance of reasonable adjustments.

However, emerging research highlights a significant safeguarding concern: trauma in autistic children is frequently overlooked, misunderstood or misattributed to autism itself. This phenomenon, often referred to as diagnostic overshadowing, occurs when professionals assume a child's difficulties are solely explained by their autism, rather than considering whether trauma may also be present.

For safeguarding professionals, this raises an important question: **Could we be missing trauma because we are seeing autism first?**

Why are autistic children more vulnerable?

Research suggests autistic children and young people are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and traumatic events than their non-autistic peers. They face increased risks of bullying, social exclusion, victimisation, family stress and other forms of adversity. Several factors may increase vulnerability:

- **Difficulties communicating distress**
- **Increased dependence on adults for protection and advocacy**
- **Social vulnerability and exploitation**
- **Higher rates of isolation and exclusion**
- **Co-occurring learning, communication or mental health needs**

In schools, these vulnerabilities can leave autistic pupils particularly exposed to safeguarding risks that may not always be recognised.

Trauma does not always look like trauma

Traditionally, trauma is associated with serious events such as abuse, violence or life-threatening incidents. While these experiences remain critically important, autistic children often describe other experiences as deeply traumatic. These can include:

- **Persistent bullying**
- **Social rejection**
- **Sensory overload**
- **Being misunderstood repeatedly**
- **Restrictive practices, restraint or seclusion**
- **Loss of autonomy and control**
- **Feeling unsafe in overwhelming environments**

What may appear to adults as a relatively minor event can be experienced very differently by an autistic child. Schools therefore need to be cautious about dismissing a child's distress simply because an incident appears insignificant from an adult perspective.

The safeguarding challenge: Trauma can mimic autism

One of the most important messages from the research is that trauma in autistic children may not present in the same way as it does in neurotypical children. Rather than classic PTSD symptoms, schools may observe:

- **Increased rigidity and reliance on routines**
- **Escalation in repetitive behaviours**
- **Communication regression**
- **Withdrawal from activities**
- **Heightened sensory sensitivities**
- **Sleep difficulties**
- **Increased anxiety**
- **School refusal or emotionally based school avoidance**

The difficulty is that many of these signs can also be associated with autism itself. This creates a significant safeguarding risk. Changes in behaviour may be explained away as "part of their autism" rather than prompting curiosity about what may have changed in the child's life.

Read:
https://www.acamh.org/blog/autistic-children-trauma-missed/

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

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

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