



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Beyond managing the incident: Creating safer responses to harmful sexual behaviour in schools

The publication of new guidance from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation provides a timely reminder that how schools respond to harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) matters just as much as how they work to prevent it.

Schools are increasingly managing incidents involving inappropriate sexual language, online image sharing, sexual harassment, unwanted touching, coercive behaviours and technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour. While every incident requires an immediate safeguarding response, the guidance encourages schools to think beyond the individual event and consider whether their systems, culture and curriculum are helping to reduce the likelihood of future harm.

Every incident should strengthen safeguarding practice

Keeping Children Safe in Education makes clear that schools should adopt a whole-school approach to safeguarding. Harmful sexual behaviour should never be viewed as "just banter", "part of growing up" or dealt with purely as a behaviour issue.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation's guidance reinforces this message by encouraging schools to respond consistently, proportionately and with safeguarding at the centre of decision-making. Alongside protecting and supporting those affected, schools should also consider the needs, risks and support required for children displaying harmful sexual behaviour, recognising that both safeguarding and education have an important role to play.

What should schools review?

Following any incident, leaders should ask themselves:

- Were all children involved safe and appropriately supported?
- Was the incident accurately recorded and reviewed by the DSL?
- Were parents informed appropriately, taking account of safeguarding considerations?
- Were external agencies consulted where necessary?
- Were any contextual safeguarding risks identified?
- Does this incident suggest wider cultural issues within the school?
- Does staff training need strengthening?
- Does the curriculum require further work around consent, respectful relationships or online behaviour?
- Are supervision arrangements, reporting systems or environmental risks contributing factors?

The strongest safeguarding responses use incidents as opportunities to strengthen prevention rather than simply bringing an individual case to a close.

Prevention is everyone's responsibility

One of the strongest themes running through the guidance is that prevention cannot rely solely on the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Creating a safer culture requires:

- confident staff who know how to recognise and respond to concerns
- clear safeguarding policies and reporting procedures
- age-appropriate Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)
- pupil voice helping shape safeguarding practice
- engagement with parents and carers
- effective multi-agency partnerships
- leadership commitment to a whole-school safeguarding culture

Moving beyond punishment alone

The guidance also encourages schools to reflect on whether purely punitive responses always achieve the best safeguarding outcomes.

While sanctions may be appropriate, schools should also consider restorative and educational approaches where safe to do so. Helping children understand the impact of their behaviour, rebuild healthy relationships and prevent future harm may be more effective than relying solely on punishment.

This does not reduce accountability; rather, it recognises that safeguarding seeks both to protect victims and reduce future risk. Research from the Everyone's Safer project found that whole-school, strengths-based and restorative approaches can help improve reporting, strengthen relationships and support long-term prevention when used alongside clear safeguarding procedures.

Questions for DSLs and safeguarding leaders

Consider discussing the following with your safeguarding team:

- Would staff respond consistently if the same incident occurred tomorrow?
- Are low-level sexualised behaviours being recognised and recorded?
- Do pupils feel confident reporting concerns?
- Are staff confident distinguishing age-appropriate behaviour from harmful sexual behaviour?
- Does your safeguarding curriculum reflect current online risks, including image sharing, coercion and technology-assisted abuse?
- Are lessons learned from previous incidents informing policy, staff training and curriculum development?

Key message

Managing incidents well is essential, but preventing the next one is even more important. Every safeguarding concern should prompt schools to ask not only "What happened?" but also "What can we learn?"

The most effective safeguarding cultures are those where incidents lead to reflection, improved practice and continuous learning, creating safer environments in which children feel protected, listened to and respected.

Read:

<https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/advice/creating-safer-places/help-and-advice-for-schools/manage-incidents/>

New government evidence highlights the growing online risks facing children

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) has published a new Evidence and Insights Pack on Online Harms Affecting Children, bringing together the latest research, national data and examples of effective practice. While much of the discussion around online safety focuses on social media, the report reminds us that children's online lives are becoming increasingly complex, with risks extending across gaming, messaging platforms, artificial intelligence, livestreaming and online communities.

For schools, the message is clear: online safety is no longer simply an ICT or computing issue, it is a safeguarding priority that should be embedded across the whole school.

Online harms are becoming more varied

The evidence highlights the wide range of harms children may encounter online, including:

- online grooming and sexual exploitation
- child criminal exploitation
- cyberbullying and online abuse
- exposure to violent, extremist or harmful content
- misogynistic and discriminatory material
- self-harm, suicide and eating disorder content
- online fraud and financial exploitation
- image-based abuse, sextortion and the sharing of nude or semi-nude images
- coercive online relationships
- risks associated with artificial intelligence, including manipulated images and AI-generated interactions

Importantly, these harms rarely occur in isolation. Children experiencing vulnerabilities offline are often at greater risk online, meaning safeguarding professionals should always consider the wider context surrounding a child's experiences.

Online behaviour can quickly become an offline safeguarding concern

One of the strongest messages from the report is that online harm frequently has real-world consequences.

Schools increasingly see concerns involving:

- anxiety and deteriorating mental health
- child-on-child abuse
- sexual harassment and harmful sexual behaviour
- exploitation by criminal groups
- attendance concerns
- family conflict
- increased vulnerability to further abuse

Online incidents should therefore never be viewed solely as behavioural or disciplinary issues. They require safeguarding assessment, appropriate recording and, where necessary, multi-agency working.

A whole-school safeguarding approach remains essential

Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026 (current draft version) reinforces that online safety is everyone's responsibility.

Schools should ensure:

- online safety is woven throughout the curriculum rather than delivered as a one-off lesson
- safeguarding policies reflect emerging online risks
- filtering and monitoring arrangements are regularly reviewed
- staff receive regular safeguarding updates on emerging technologies
- pupils know how to report concerns confidently
- parents understand current online risks and available support

As technology evolves rapidly, staff confidence must evolve alongside it.

Artificial intelligence is changing the safeguarding landscape

The report acknowledges that emerging technologies present new safeguarding challenges. Schools are already beginning to encounter concerns involving:

- AI-generated images
- deepfake technology
- AI chatbots
- manipulated videos
- increasingly convincing scams and misinformation

Many children may not fully appreciate that AI-generated content can be misleading, manipulative or harmful. Schools should therefore include digital literacy and critical thinking within their wider safeguarding curriculum.

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-evidence-on-online-harms-affecting-children>

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

Radicalisation and extremism - Tuesday 7th July
Cybercrime - Tuesday 14th July

KCSIE 2026 - Date to be confirmed

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