



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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Children's online safety and perceptions of crime: What schools need to know

New data published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on 2nd September 2026 provides an important insight into children's experiences of online harm, sexual messages, violence and perceptions of safety.

The findings come from the redesigned Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales, involving children aged 10 to 15 years. For schools, the findings provide a timely reminder that safeguarding does not stop at the school gate. Children's experiences online, within peer groups and in their local communities can all have an impact on their safety, wellbeing and behaviour in school.

What does the data tell us?

The findings highlight the extent to which online activity forms part of children's everyday lives. Among children aged 10 to 15:

- **84% spent three or more hours online each day at weekends**
- **25% spent seven or more hours online each day at weekends**
- **66% spent three or more hours online on an ordinary weekday**
- **88% used a smartphone to access the internet**
- **37% had seen violent or criminal content online during the previous 12 months**

The most common online activities were watching videos, reels, vlogs or livestreams and messaging.

Exposure to harmful content

The findings for children aged 13 to 15 are particularly significant. Almost half, 48%, reported seeing a lot or a fair amount of hateful content online targeted at people because of particular characteristics.

In addition:

- **19% saw a lot or a fair amount of content encouraging eating disorders**
- **15% saw a lot or a fair amount of sexual images or videos**
- **12% saw a lot or a fair amount of content showing or encouraging self-harm**

Importantly, much of this exposure was unintentional. Among children exposed to these forms of harmful content, 88% had encountered at least some hateful content unintentionally, as had 83% of those exposed to eating-disorder content, 82% exposed to self-harm content and 80% exposed to sexual images or videos. This is an important safeguarding message. **Children do not necessarily have to search for harmful material to encounter it.**

Sexual messages

The survey also raises concerns about children receiving sexual messages.

Among 13 to 15-year-olds:

- **12% had received at least one sexual message during the previous 12 months**
- **25% of those receiving sexual messages had received more than 10**
- **19% had received sexual messages from an adult aged 18 or over**
- **68% of those receiving sexual messages considered them unwanted**
- **only 53% of children receiving unwanted sexual messages told someone**

Girls were particularly affected. 84% of girls who received sexual messages considered them unwanted, compared with 49% of boys. For schools, **the fact that almost half of children receiving unwanted sexual messages did not tell anyone should reinforce the importance of creating a culture where children feel safe to speak to trusted adults.**

Violence, weapons and the wider community

The findings also provide an important reminder about contextual safeguarding and the experiences children may encounter beyond school. **Among children aged 10 to 15:**

- **69% had seen or heard about a fight or other physical violence between peers**
- **25% thought it very or quite likely that people carried weapons in their local area**
- **15% were worried a lot or a fair amount about people carrying weapons locally**
- **20% thought it very or quite likely that they would see people involved in gangs in their local area**
- **9% were worried a lot or a fair amount about gangs**

Of children who had some level of concern about gangs or weapons, around a third reported changing their behaviour, including avoiding certain places, avoiding travelling alone or avoiding going out at particular times.

Online and offline harm cannot be viewed separately

One of the important messages for safeguarding practice is the relationship between children's online and offline experiences. More than a third of 10 to 15-year-olds, 37%, had seen violent or criminal content online. This included fights and physical violence, rewards for risky or violent behaviour, guides showing how to carry out illegal activities and advertisements to join groups involved in violent, threatening or criminal activity.

Schools should therefore avoid viewing online safety, child on child experiences, exploitation, serious violence and community risks as entirely separate issues. A concern first noticed in school may have its origins online, at home, within a peer group or in the wider community.

Schools remain a vital source of online-safety information

There is also an encouraging finding. 89% of children aged 10 to 15 had read or received information about staying safe online during the previous 12 months. Of those children, an overwhelming 95% received this information from school, compared with 62% who received it from a parent or guardian. This demonstrates just how important schools remain in helping children understand and manage online risk.

The most common safety information children received concerned:

- **blocking or reporting inappropriate or upsetting content**
- **talking to people online**
- **sharing or posting personal information**

However, the wider findings suggest that online-safety education must continue to evolve beyond traditional messages about passwords, privacy and strangers online. Children need age-appropriate opportunities to understand harmful content, sexual messages, online coercion and exploitation, self-harm and eating-disorder content, hateful material, violent content and how to seek help when something goes wrong.

What does this mean for schools?

The findings should encourage DSLs and senior leaders to consider whether their current safeguarding arrangements reflect the online and community experiences of their pupils.

Schools may wish to consider:

- **Pupil voice:** Do we know what our pupils are actually encountering online and in their local community?
- **Online-safety education:** Does our curriculum reflect current risks rather than simply traditional internet-safety messages?
- **Reporting:** Do children know how and where to report something that has worried, frightened or upset them?
- **Trusted adults:** Are pupils confident that they will be listened to, taken seriously and supported?
- **Professional curiosity:** Do staff consider what may be happening online or outside school when a child's behaviour, attendance or emotional wellbeing changes?
- **Filtering and monitoring:** Are systems effective, understood by relevant staff and regularly reviewed?
- **Staff training:** Do staff understand how online harm may present as a safeguarding concern in school?
- **Parents and carers:** Are families receiving regular, practical information about emerging online risks?
- **Contextual safeguarding:** Does the school understand local concerns relating to violence, weapons, gangs and exploitation?

The KCSIE 2026 link

The findings are particularly relevant in the context of Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026. KCSIE reinforces that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, that staff should maintain a child-centred approach, and that children need the right help at the right time. Staff should recognise indicators of harm, including changes in behaviour or attendance, disclosures and online threats, and act immediately where they have concerns about a child's welfare.

Schools and colleges must also have appropriate filtering and monitoring systems, with leaders, DSLs, governors and relevant staff understanding their respective responsibilities. **The key message** is that technology is now embedded within children's lives. Online experiences should not be treated as separate from safeguarding practice.

Know your children. Understand their online world. Listen to their experiences. Be professionally curious. Act on concerns.

Read:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/childrensperceptionsofformerandonlineactivityinenglandandwales/yearendingfebruary2026>

Safeguarding Network Meeting - Thursday 22nd October, 3:45pm - 5pm

This free Safeguarding Network Meeting will provide an opportunity for Designated Safeguarding Leads, Deputy DSLs and senior leaders to reflect on how the changes are working in practice, discuss emerging issues and ask any questions that have arisen. The session will be practical, interactive and discussion-based, and will include:

-  **KCSIE 2026 - Frequently asked questions**
-  **Interactive safeguarding scenarios based on real-life situations schools are facing**
-  **Discussion around professional curiosity, online safety and AI, Family Help, child-on-child abuse, information sharing, record keeping and decision making**
-  **Sharing safeguarding challenges, ideas and good practice with colleagues from across our schools**

Free to schools subscribing to our Safeguarding SLA. I hope you can join us.

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 1 2026

Pupils mental health - Tuesday 15th September

Depression - Tuesday 22nd September

Anxiety - Tuesday 29th September

Self harm and suicidal ideation - Tuesday 6th October

Anti-bullying - Tuesday 13th October

Domestic abuse - Tuesday 20th October

Everything You Need for September 2026 - including the latest KCSIE 2026 updates, 'Further changes to Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026' powerpoint and revised Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy:

<https://www.services4schools.org.uk/cpd-zone/safeguarding/safeguarding-everything-you-need-for-september-2026>

The final version of Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) 2026:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education-2>

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