



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE - WHAT DO PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 15TH SEPTEMBER 2026 • ISSUE 3

What parents need to know: What are children really experiencing online?

Children's online lives are constantly changing. Social media, messaging, gaming, videos and livestreams can provide opportunities to socialise, learn and have fun, but they can also expose children to content and contact that may be upsetting, inappropriate or harmful.

New findings from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), published on 2nd September 2026, give us an important insight into what children aged 10 to 15 in England and Wales are experiencing online.

How much time are children spending online?

For many children, being online is a significant part of everyday life. The ONS found that **84%** of children aged 10 to 15 spent **three or more hours online each day at weekends**, with a **quarter spending seven hours or more**. On an ordinary weekday, **66% spent three or more hours online**.

Smartphones were the most commonly used device, with **88%** of children using one to access the internet. Watching videos, reels, vlogs or livestreams and messaging were among the most common activities.

The amount of time a child spends online does not, on its own, tell us whether their online experience is positive or harmful. What matters is also what they are seeing, who they are communicating with and how their online experiences are affecting them.

One of the most important findings is that children do not necessarily have to search for harmful content to encounter it.

Among children aged 13 to 15:

- **48% had seen a lot or a fair amount of hateful content**
- **19% had seen a lot or a fair amount of content encouraging eating disorders**
- **15% had seen a lot or a fair amount of sexual images or videos**
- **12% had seen a lot or a fair amount of content showing or encouraging self-harm.**

Most children who had been exposed to these types of content had encountered at least some of it unintentionally. This is an important message for parents. A child does not necessarily have to actively search for harmful material. Content can appear through recommendations, feeds, shared posts, group chats or videos.

What about violent or criminal content?

The ONS found that 37% of children aged 10 to 15 had seen violent or criminal content online during the previous 12 months. The most commonly reported type was fights or other physical violence between people. Some children had also encountered material involving risky or violent behaviour, guides showing how to carry out illegal activities or advertisements to join groups involved in violent, threatening or criminal behaviour.

Rather than only asking your child "Which apps are you using?", it can therefore be helpful to ask "What sort of things are appearing in your feed?"

Sexual messages: would your child tell you?

The findings around sexual messages are particularly important. Around **12%** of children aged 13 to 15 had received at least one sexual message during the previous 12 months. Of those who received sexual messages, **19%** had received them from an adult aged 18 or over, and more than two-thirds, **68%**, considered the messages they received to be unwanted. Girls were particularly likely to describe these messages as unwanted: **84%** of girls who received sexual messages considered them unwanted, compared with **49%** of boys. Perhaps most importantly, only **53%** of children who received unwanted sexual messages told someone about them.

Why might a child not tell?

Children may worry about how adults will react. They may think:

- "I'll get into trouble"
- "You'll take my phone away"
- "You'll be angry with me"
- "It was my fault because I replied"
- "You'll stop me using the app"
- "Everyone will find out"

This is why our response matters. If your child tells you that something worrying or inappropriate has happened online, try to stay calm, listen and take them seriously. Avoid beginning with blame or focusing immediately on what they should have done differently. Your first priority is to understand what has happened and make sure they are safe.

Start conversations before something goes wrong

Online safety conversations do not have to be formal or frightening.

Try asking:

- "What do you enjoy doing online at the moment?"
- "What sorts of videos are coming up in your feed?"
- "Does anything ever appear that you didn't ask to see?"
- "What would you do if somebody sent you something that made you uncomfortable?"
- "Who could you talk to if something happened online that worried you?"

Talking little and often can be more effective than waiting until there is a problem.

Look out for changes

Sometimes children will tell us directly that something has happened. At other times, changes in their behaviour may be the first indication that they are worried or distressed.

You might notice your child:

- becoming unusually secretive about their phone or device
- appearing upset, anxious or angry after going online
- suddenly avoiding a particular app, game or group chat
- becoming worried when messages or notifications arrive
- withdrawing from friends or family

- experiencing changes in sleep or eating
- showing changes in mood or behaviour

These signs do not necessarily mean something harmful is happening online. However, they provide an opportunity to check in, listen and find out what may be happening.

What can parents and carers do?

Keep talking about your child's online life, not just when something goes wrong. Explore privacy and safety settings together and make sure they know how to block and report inappropriate content or contact.

Talk openly, in an age-appropriate way, about unwanted sexual messages, pressure to share images and what to do if someone asks them to keep an online conversation secret. Help your child understand that content appearing in their feed is not always something they have chosen to see and that online platforms may recommend further similar content based on what they watch or interact with.

Most importantly, make sure they know that asking for help will not automatically result in punishment or losing access to their device.

Schools and families working together

There is also an encouraging finding in the ONS report. An estimated **89%** of children aged 10 to 15 had received or read information about staying safe online during the previous 12 months. Among those children, **95%** received information from school and **62%** from a parent or guardian.

Schools therefore have a significant role, but online safety works best when schools, parents and carers reinforce the same messages.

The most important message

You do not need to understand every app, game or social media platform your child uses.

What matters is creating a relationship where your child knows:

- I can tell you if something goes wrong.
- You will listen to me.
- You will take me seriously.
- You will help me rather than immediately blame me.
- I don't have to deal with something frightening or upsetting on my own

Keep talking. Keep listening. Stay interested in their online world.

Read:

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

Recommended free courses and workshops for parents/carers

LGfL ParentSafe is a free online resource designed specifically for parents and carers.

It provides practical advice on:

- parental controls and safety settings
- social media, apps and devices
- screen time
- harmful and inappropriate content
- online relationships and sexual content
- bullying and other online harms
- generative AI
- talking to your child about their online life
- reporting concerns and getting help

You don't need to be an online safety expert. ParentSafe provides straightforward advice to help you understand your child's online world and start those important conversations at home.

Visit the free LGfL ParentSafe website:

<https://parentsafe.lgfl.net/>

GOV.UK - Online safety and media literacy resources

The Government provides free online safety and media literacy resources to help parents and carers support children to navigate the online world safely and confidently.

The resources include practical guidance to help families:

- encourage children to think critically about what they see online
- recognise false, misleading or harmful content
- understand how online content can influence opinions and behaviour
- talk to children about what they see, read and share online
- develop children's digital resilience and media literacy
- know where to find trusted advice and support

These resources can help parents and carers have regular conversations with their children about not simply accepting everything they see online as accurate or trustworthy. A useful free resource for helping children become safer, more informed and more critical users of online content.

Link to GOV.UK resources:

<https://kidsonlinesafety.campaign.gov.uk/>

CEOP Education - National Crime Agency

CEOP Education, part of the National Crime Agency, provides free, trusted online safety advice and resources to help parents and carers protect and support their children online.

The resources include practical guidance on:

- online sexual abuse and grooming
- inappropriate or unwanted sexual messages
- online blackmail and sextortion
- pressure to share intimate images
- AI-generated or manipulated sexual images
- recognising concerning online behaviour
- how and when to report concerns
- talking to children about difficult or sensitive online experiences

Link to resources:

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/>