



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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What do schools need to know? Online harm groups

CEOP Education has published new guidance for professionals about online harm groups, sometimes referred to as “Com” groups.

These are online networks where individuals use grooming, coercion, manipulation and blackmail to exploit and harm others. Activity can involve child sexual abuse, cybercrime, extremist content and, in some cases, offline violence.

Both victims and those causing harm are predominantly under 18, meaning that children involved in perpetrating harmful behaviour may themselves have been groomed, coerced or victimised and may also require safeguarding support.

What might staff notice?

There is no single indicator that proves a child is involved with an online harm group. Staff should instead consider patterns, context and significant changes in behaviour.

Potential indicators can include:

- unusual or concerning self-harm or injuries
- increased secrecy around online activity
- significant amounts of time spent online
- distress, anger or withdrawal following online interactions
- fear or reluctance to leave an online group
- an intense focus on new online friends
- increasing social isolation
- unexplained injuries to siblings or pets

Children may not recognise themselves as victims. Grooming and coercion can also result in a child defending the person harming them, minimising what has happened or believing that complying is their only option.

What should schools do if they are concerned?

Treat concerns as a safeguarding issue and follow your school's child protection procedures.

Where appropriate, concerns should be reported to Children's Services and the police. Call 999 if someone is in immediate danger.

Importantly, CEOP advises that potential evidence such as messages, images, videos, usernames, group names and links should not be deleted, as these may be important to an investigation.

All children involved should be considered from a safeguarding perspective, including children who may have caused harm. A coordinated multi-agency response may be required.

Should we teach pupils about “Com” groups?

Not directly.

CEOP specifically advises that online harm or “Com” groups should not be the subject of a talk or assembly, as raising awareness in this way could inadvertently generate curiosity or interest.

Instead, schools should strengthen existing online safety education by helping pupils recognise the methods used to exploit children, including:

- grooming and coercion
- blackmail and threats
- pressure to share nude or sexual images
- manipulation within online relationships
- how to leave an uncomfortable online conversation
- how and where to ask for help

Key message

Don't focus on the name of the group, focus on the tactics. Help children recognise grooming, coercion, manipulation, blackmail and pressure, know when something isn't right and, most importantly, know that they can tell a trusted adult and get help without fear of blame.

Read:

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/professionals/guidance/online-harm-groups/>

What do schools need to know? Bullying, violence and weapon carrying

New research funded by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) has examined the relationship between children's experiences of bullying and later violent behaviour and weapon carrying.

The study followed almost 10,000 children, looking at experiences of bullying at ages 8, 10 and 12 and later outcomes including violence and weapon carrying.

The findings provide an important reminder for schools that bullying is not simply a behaviour issue – it can also be a safeguarding and early intervention concern.

What did the research find?

Between the ages of 8 and 12, 60.5% of children in the study reported some involvement in bullying:

- 38.8% reported being victims only
- 21.7% were identified as perpetrators, including children who had both bullied others and experienced bullying themselves

Children who bullied others were more likely to report later violence and weapon carrying. After researchers accounted for a range of individual, family and contextual factors, children who had bullied others had around twice the odds of self-reported violence and 1.5 times the odds of police-recorded violence compared with children not involved in

bullying. The association was particularly strong for physical bullying.

What about weapon carrying?

This is one of the particularly important findings for schools.

Both children who bullied others and children who had experienced bullying were more likely to report carrying a weapon at age 15.

After accounting for children's backgrounds, children who bullied others were 2.2 times more likely to report carrying a weapon, while children who had been bullied were 1.5 times more likely, compared with children who had not been involved in bullying.

For some children, carrying a weapon may be connected to feeling unsafe or believing they need protection.

Repeated bullying matters

The research also found that children who demonstrated bullying behaviour at multiple ages had a greater likelihood of later violence.

This reinforces the importance of schools looking beyond individual incidents. **Repeated bullying behaviour should prompt questions such as:**

What is happening for this child? Why is this behaviour continuing? Are there wider safeguarding, family, peer-group or contextual factors that we need to understand?

What should schools consider?

Schools should ensure that bullying is identified and responded to early and consistently, with support available both for children experiencing bullying and those displaying bullying behaviours.

Where bullying is persistent, escalating or linked to threats, violence or concerns about weapons, schools should consider whether this indicates a wider safeguarding need requiring DSL involvement and potentially multi-agency support.

Patterns across behaviour, attendance, peer relationships, online activity and safeguarding records can be particularly important.

A note of caution

The research identifies an association, not proof that bullying causes later violence or weapon carrying.

The children studied were from the Bristol area and their bullying experiences occurred during the mid-to-late 2000s. The study therefore did not capture more contemporary experiences such as cyberbullying, and the researchers caution against assuming the findings represent all children today.

Key message

Don't treat persistent bullying as an isolated behaviour problem. Look beyond the incident, consider the child's wider circumstances and intervene early.

For children experiencing bullying, ask not only “How do we stop the bullying?” but also “Does this child feel safe?”

For children displaying bullying behaviours, ask “What is driving this behaviour, and what support or intervention does this child need?”

Early identification, professional curiosity and appropriate support may help prevent concerns from becoming more serious.

Read:

<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/secondary-data-analysis/the-association-between-bullying-and-violent-crime/>

News story:

<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/news/first-uk-study-finds-association-between-childhood-bullying-and-later-weapon-carrying/>

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

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**

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 1 2026

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/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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