



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Child-on-child sexual abuse: What schools need to know

A recent Guardian investigation has highlighted the concerning scale of child-on-child sexual abuse in schools across England and Wales, reinforcing the importance of vigilance, early identification and effective safeguarding responses.

What has the investigation revealed?

Police data obtained through Freedom of Information requests identified:

- **At least 8,500 sexual offences against children under 13 recorded on or near school premises between 2021 and 2025 – approximately 1,700 each year.**
- **Reports included rape, attempted rape and unwanted sexual touching, with both primary and secondary-aged children affected.**
- **Girls were disproportionately represented among reported victims, although boys were also affected.**
- **A further 6,140 offences involving indecent or prohibited images of children were identified, highlighting concerns about online sexual harm.**

These figures are likely to underestimate the extent of the problem, as not all police forces provided data and many incidents go unreported. Not every recorded offence was confirmed as child-on-child abuse.

What does KCSIE 2026 expect schools to do?

KCSIE 2026 is clear that child-on-child abuse can happen in any school, including primary settings, and staff must never dismiss harmful sexual behaviour as banter, experimentation or an inevitable part of growing up.

Schools should ensure that:

- **All concerns are taken seriously:** Sexual harassment, inappropriate touching, coercion and harmful sexual behaviour must be recognised, recorded and reported promptly.
- **Victims are protected and supported:** Listen without judgement, avoid unnecessary questioning and ensure appropriate safety planning.
- **Risk assessments are completed:** Consider the safety and needs of the child harmed, the child alleged to have caused harm and other potentially affected pupils.
- **DSLs take appropriate action:** Follow local safeguarding procedures, including referrals to children's social care and police involvement where appropriate.
- **Prevention is prioritised:** Deliver age-appropriate RSHE covering healthy relationships, consent, personal boundaries, respect and online safety.
- **Safeguarding culture is regularly reviewed:** Identify potential hotspots, listen to pupil voice and challenge attitudes that normalise sexual harassment or abuse.

Questions for school leaders and DSLs

Would every member of staff recognise harmful sexual behaviour, know how to respond to a disclosure and understand when to escalate a concern?

Schools should use these findings to review staff training, child-on-child abuse procedures, supervision arrangements and the effectiveness of their safeguarding culture.

Key message: Child-on-child sexual abuse is not confined to secondary schools. Early recognition, a consistent safeguarding response and a culture in which children feel safe to speak out are essential to protecting every child.

Read:
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2026/oct/04/child-on-child-sexual-abuse-schools-england-and-wales>

AI-generated child sexual abuse images: What schools need to know

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has reported a significant increase in AI-generated child sexual abuse imagery, highlighting the growing risks posed by artificial intelligence and the importance of online safeguarding in schools.

What has the IWF revealed?

Between January and June 2026, IWF analysts identified **6,310** AI-generated images meeting the legal definition of child sexual abuse material, a **40%** increase compared with the whole of 2025, when **4,512** images were identified.

The findings are particularly concerning for primary schools:

- **79% of identified images depicted children aged 7-13**
- **98% of images where age and gender were recorded depicted girls**
- **1,004 images depicted children aged 3-6, while 190 depicted children under two**

AI technology can be used to create realistic abusive imagery, including manipulating genuine photographs of children. Although an image may be artificially generated, the harm caused to identifiable children can be very real.

What does KCSIE 2026 expect schools to do?

KCSIE 2026 reinforces the importance of recognising emerging online risks, including AI-generated imagery, deepfakes and the misuse of children's photographs.

Schools should ensure that:

- **Staff understand AI-related risks:** Provide regular safeguarding updates on deepfakes, manipulated images, sexual harassment, coercion and online exploitation.
- **Children receive age-appropriate education:** Teach pupils about privacy, consent, sharing photographs, online manipulation and seeking help if an image makes them uncomfortable.
- **Concerns are reported immediately:** Any disclosure involving sexualised or manipulated images must be taken seriously, recorded and referred to the DSL.
- **Images are handled safely:** Staff must not copy, download, forward or unnecessarily view suspected child sexual abuse material. Follow safeguarding procedures and seek police advice where appropriate.

- **Filtering and monitoring are effective:** Review whether existing systems, reporting arrangements and staff supervision adequately address emerging AI-related risks.
- **Parents are kept informed:** Share practical advice about children's photographs, privacy settings, AI image-editing tools and how to report harmful content.

Questions for school leaders and DSLs

Would staff recognise an AI-generated sexual image as a safeguarding concern, even if the image was described as fake or created as a joke?

Schools should review their online safety policies, staff training, RSHE curriculum and reporting procedures to ensure AI-generated sexual abuse imagery is explicitly considered.

Key message: AI-generated does not mean harmless. Schools must respond to manipulated sexual imagery with the same seriousness as other forms of child sexual abuse, prioritising children's safety, dignity and wellbeing.

Read:
<https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/more-ai-generated-child-sexual-abuse-images-found-in-the-first-six-months-of-2026-than-all-of-2025-iwf-warns/>

Supporting parents in the Early Years: What schools need to know

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) has published findings from its A Better Start programme, drawing on ten years of learning across five partnerships. The report highlights how building parents' confidence, strengthening relationships and providing accessible support can improve outcomes for young children.

What has the report revealed?

The report, Parents as Partners – Skills, Knowledge and Confidence, identifies several important lessons for schools and early years settings:

- **One size does not fit all:** Parenting programmes are most effective at engaging families when combined with flexible, personalised support.
- **Practical help matters:** Parents value advice on everyday challenges, including healthy eating, behaviour, financial wellbeing and child development.
- **Accessibility is essential:** Offering flexible appointments, local venues and different ways to engage helps remove barriers for families.
- **Trust builds engagement:** Positive relationships with familiar professionals and community organisations encourage parents to seek support.
- **Parents should be partners:** Involving families in developing services strengthens their confidence and helps ensure support meets their needs.

What does this mean for schools?

The findings reinforce the importance of early identification, positive parental relationships and timely family support, consistent with the preventative approach promoted in KCSIE 2026 and Working Together to Safeguard Children.

Schools should consider:

- **Identifying needs early:** Recognise emerging concerns relating to children's development, attendance, behaviour, wellbeing or family circumstances.
- **Building trusting relationships:** Create opportunities for parents to discuss difficulties without fear of judgement.
- **Offering practical support:** Provide accessible advice, workshops and signposting to local services, including Family Hubs.
- **Working collaboratively:** Involve parents in decisions about support, while keeping the child's needs and safety central.
- **Removing barriers:** Consider language, literacy, disability, transport, childcare and digital access when communicating with families.
- **Strengthening multi-agency working:** Work with health visitors, school nurses, Family Help services and other professionals where additional support is required.

Questions for school leaders and DSLs

Do we make it easy for families to ask for help before difficulties escalate, and are we confident that our support reaches those who need it most?

Schools should review how they identify emerging needs, communicate with parents and evaluate the effectiveness of family support.

Key message: Effective safeguarding begins with prevention. Building trusting relationships, listening to parents and providing the right support at the right time can make a lasting difference to children's safety, wellbeing and development.

Read:
<https://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/practice-and-programmes/focusing-early-years/better-start/what-weve-learned/better-start>

Autumn term 2

Radicalisation - Tuesday 10th November
Child-on-child sexual abuse - Tuesday 17th November
Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 24th November
Child sexual exploitation (CSE) - Tuesday 1st December
County lines - Tuesday 8th December
Trauma - Tuesday 15th December

Wishing you a wonderful half-term break!

It's time for everyone in the education sector to take a well-deserved break. Whether you're planning a relaxing holiday or simply enjoying some downtime, I hope you return feeling refreshed and recharged.

The newsletter will return on **Tuesday, 3rd November**. Until then, enjoy the rest, relaxation, and the opportunity to recharge!

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