



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE - WHAT DO PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

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TUESDAY 20TH OCTOBER 2026 • ISSUE 8

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

A recent investigation by The Guardian has highlighted concerns about sexual abuse between children in schools across England and Wales. The findings are an important reminder that children of all ages need to feel safe, respected and confident about speaking up when something is wrong.

What has the investigation revealed?

Police recorded at least **8,500** sexual offences against **children under 13** on or near school premises between 2021 and 2025, approximately **1,700 each year**.

Incidents included unwanted sexual touching and serious sexual assaults. Girls were more frequently identified as victims, although boys were also affected. The investigation also highlighted concerns about harmful sexual images being shared online.

These figures relate to reported offences, not all of which were confirmed as abuse between children, and the true scale of harm may be greater.

What should parents be aware of?

Child-on-child sexual abuse can involve inappropriate touching, unwanted sexual comments, pressure to engage in sexual activity, threats or sharing sexual images without consent.

Children may not always recognise that something is wrong or feel confident telling an adult.

Possible signs that a child needs support include:

- **Becoming withdrawn, anxious or unusually upset**
- **Suddenly avoiding school, particular places or other children**
- **Changes in sleep, behaviour or friendships**
- **Showing distress about messages, photographs or online interactions**
- **Displaying sexualised behaviour or knowledge that causes concern for their age and development**

These signs do not necessarily mean abuse has occurred, but they should never be ignored.

How can parents help protect their children?

- **Talk openly and regularly.** Encourage conversations about friendships, personal boundaries, privacy and feeling safe. Remind children that their body belongs to them and they can say no to unwanted contact.
- **Teach children to recognise unsafe behaviour.** Explain in an age-appropriate way that nobody should pressure, frighten or threaten them into doing something uncomfortable, even another child or a friend.
- **Keep conversations about online safety going.** Discuss inappropriate messages, sharing photographs, online pressure and why children should tell a trusted adult if something worries them.
- **Listen calmly if your child tells you something.** Reassure them that they have done the right thing by speaking up. Avoid blame, remain calm and do not ask leading questions or promise secrecy.
- **Raise concerns promptly.** Contact your child's school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) if you are worried. You can also contact children's social care or the police directly if necessary.

What should parents expect from schools?

Schools have safeguarding responsibilities under Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026.

They should take concerns seriously, respond appropriately, protect children from further harm and work with families and safeguarding professionals when necessary.

Remember: Children should never feel responsible for abuse or be expected to manage unsafe situations alone. Regular conversations, trusted relationships and early action can make a real difference.

AI-generated sexual images: What parents need to know

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has warned of a worrying rise in AI-generated child sexual abuse images online. Its latest findings highlight why parents need to understand how artificial intelligence (AI) can be misused and how to help children stay safe.

What has the IWF revealed?

During the first six months of 2026, the IWF identified **6,310** AI-generated child sexual abuse images, a **40%** increase compared with the whole of 2025.

Concerningly, **79%** of these images depicted children aged 7-13, while others depicted much younger children. Girls featured in **98%** of images where age and gender were recorded. These figures show that AI-related risks are relevant to children of all ages, including those attending primary school.

What are AI-generated sexual images?

AI technology can create realistic-looking images of people or alter existing photographs. These manipulated images are sometimes called deepfakes.

For example, someone could take an ordinary photograph of a child and use AI to create a fake sexual image without their knowledge or consent.

Although the image may be fake, the embarrassment, distress, bullying and harm experienced by the child can be very real.

How can parents help protect their children?

- **Talk about AI and deepfakes.** Explain that not everything children see online is real and that technology can be used to create convincing fake images.
- **Think before sharing photographs.** Review privacy settings on social media and consider who can see, download or share photographs of your child.
- **Discuss consent and respect.** Help children understand that creating, altering or sharing someone's image in a sexual way is never a joke and can be a serious offence.
- **Encourage children to speak up.** Reassure your child that they can tell you if someone

- shares an upsetting image, threatens them or asks for photographs. They will not be blamed for seeking help.

- **Know how to respond.** If your child is affected, stay calm, listen and reassure them. Do not download, forward or share suspected child sexual abuse images. Report concerns to the school, police or appropriate online reporting service.

Where can parents get help?

- **Internet Watch Foundation (IWF):** Report suspected online child sexual abuse material at www.iwf.org.uk.
- **Report Remove:** A free service to help under-18s report and remove sexual images or videos of themselves shared online.
- **NSPCC:** Advice and support for parents on **0800 800 5000**.
- **Childline:** Confidential support for children on **0800 1111**.

Remember

AI-generated does not mean harmless. Talking openly about online safety, protecting children's privacy and encouraging them to seek help can make a real difference.

Children should always know that if something happens online that makes them uncomfortable, frightened or embarrassed, they can tell a trusted adult and receive support.

Giving children the best start in life: What parents need to know

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) has shared findings from its A Better Start programme, drawing on ten years of experience supporting families with young children. The report highlights the importance of building parents' confidence, offering practical advice and providing support before small challenges become bigger difficulties.

What has the report revealed?

The report found that parents benefit most when support is practical, flexible and tailored to their family's needs.

Key findings include:

- **Every family is different:** Parenting advice works best when it reflects individual circumstances rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Everyday challenges matter:** Parents particularly valued support with healthy eating, children's development, financial wellbeing and family life.
- **Asking for help makes a difference:** Accessing support early can help families manage challenges before they become more difficult.
- **Connecting with others helps:** Parent groups, community activities and trusted professionals can provide reassurance, advice and encouragement.
- **Parents' voices matter:** Families benefit when they are involved in shaping the support available to them.

How can parents support their child's development?

- **Make time to connect.** Everyday activities such as talking, reading, playing and sharing meals help strengthen relationships and support children's learning and development.
- **Build confidence through routines.** Predictable routines around meals, sleep, play and school can help children feel secure and develop independence.
- **Talk about feelings.** Encourage children to express their emotions and reassure them that all feelings are important. Help them develop healthy ways of managing frustration, worry and disappointment.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for advice.** Whether you're concerned about behaviour, development, friendships or family circumstances, speaking to a trusted professional early can help you explore the support available.
- **Connect with other parents.** Parent groups, school activities and community services can provide opportunities to share experiences, learn new skills and feel less isolated.

Where can parents find support?

You don't need to wait until a problem becomes serious before asking for help.

- **Your child's school or nursery:** Speak to a teacher, family support worker or safeguarding lead.
- **Family Hubs:** Offer access to parenting advice, family support and services for young children.
- **Health visitors and school nurses:** Can provide advice about children's health, wellbeing and development.
- **Local community groups:** Often provide parenting workshops, play sessions and opportunities to meet other families.

Free resources for parents and carers

NSPCC - PANTS: The Underwear Rule: Free, age-appropriate resources to help parents teach young children about body safety, personal boundaries and speaking to a trusted adult if something makes them uncomfortable. Includes activities and guidance for starting sensitive conversations.

Find out more:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/advice-for-families/pants-underwear-rule/>

Internet Watch Foundation - AI Child Sexual Abuse Imagery: Advice for Parents and Carers: Free guidance explaining how AI can be misused to create sexual images of children, with practical advice on protecting photographs, discussing deepfakes and responding to concerns.

Find out more:

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/resources/ai-child-abuse-imagery-parent-guide/>

NHS - Services and Support for Parents: Free information about parenting support, health visitors, children's development and Best Start Family Hubs. Helps families find local advice, parenting programmes and practical support during the early years.

Find out more:

<https://www.nhs.uk/baby/support-and-services/services-and-support-for-parents/>