

Safeguarding Scenario 15 – Online Friend: What Would You Do?

As a former Headteacher and now Safeguarding Consultant, one of the questions I often ask during safeguarding training and audits is:

What would you do if a child told you that an online 'friend' had been encouraging them to harm themselves?



The Scenario

Sarah, a member of the school office team, hears a child, Ethan, crying near the school entrance. She knows Ethan has experienced anxiety before, but not like this. She gently asks what is wrong. Ethan tells her he has been thinking about hurting himself – and that someone he describes as an 'online friend' has been encouraging him to do it.

Ethan tells Sarah...

"They understand how I feel better than anyone else."

"They said hurting myself might make everything feel better."

"They told me not to tell anyone because adults will just stop us talking."

Sarah doesn't know whether this 'friend' is another child, an adult, an anonymous user or someone presenting a false identity online.

- ⊗ This is not simply an online safety issue or a mental health issue. It is a safeguarding concern requiring immediate action. **KCSIE 2026** makes clear that mental health problems can, in some circumstances, develop into safeguarding concerns, including self-harm, suicidal ideation or risk of suicide. Staff should also recognise that online activity can expose children to abuse, exploitation and other forms of harm.

What Should Sarah Do?

1 Immediate Priority is Ethan's Safety

Remain calm, listen carefully and take what Ethan is saying seriously. Do not leave him alone while there is a concern he may be at immediate risk of harming himself. Do not promise confidentiality – explain that because you are worried about his safety, you need to share what he has told you with someone who can help.

2 Report to the DSL Immediately

Follow the school's child protection procedures and inform the DSL or deputy without delay. KCSIE 2026 is clear that staff should act immediately when they have concerns about a child's welfare. The DSL will need to consider both: Ethan's immediate emotional and physical safety, including the level of risk of self-harm or suicide; and the online safeguarding risk – who is communicating with Ethan, what they are encouraging him to do, and whether there may be grooming, coercion, exploitation or another form of abuse.

3 Don't Investigate

Sarah's role is not to investigate the online contact herself. She should not interrogate Ethan about the person, attempt to contact the "online friend", or independently search through Ethan's accounts. Instead, she should listen, clarify only what is necessary to understand the immediate safeguarding concern, record what Ethan has said accurately and pass the information to the DSL.

4 Record What Was Said

Make an accurate, timely record using Ethan's own words wherever possible. The record should distinguish clearly between what Ethan said, what Sarah observed and what action was taken. KCSIE 2026 emphasises appropriate record keeping, including recording concerns, actions, decisions, the rationale for those decisions and outcomes.

5 Consider the Online Risk

The DSL should consider the online safety risk through the recognised areas of content, contact, conduct and commerce. Contact is particularly significant – an unknown person is communicating directly with Ethan and encouraging harmful behaviour. There may also be a content risk if Ethan is being directed towards material that promotes or normalises self-harm or suicide. The identity of the "online friend" should never simply be assumed.

6 Take Proportionate Safeguarding Action

Depending on the level of risk, the DSL may need to consider: the school's procedures for children at risk of self-harm or suicide; contacting parents/carers, where appropriate and safe to do so; seeking appropriate health or mental health support; whether children's social care and/or the police should be involved; whether specialist online safeguarding advice is required; and how relevant online evidence should be preserved without unnecessarily exposing the child or staff to harmful material. If Ethan is believed to be in immediate danger, emergency action should be taken – KCSIE's staff overview specifically states that if a child is in immediate danger, staff should call 999.

Remember...



Professional Curiosity

Who is the "online friend", and what might be happening beyond what Ethan has disclosed?



Record, Don't Investigate

Document accurately using the child's own words. That is your role – not to investigate.



Share With the DSL Without Delay

Don't wait, don't minimise. Share the concern with your Designated Safeguarding Lead immediately.



Consider Immediate Risk of Self-Harm or Suicide

Always consider the immediate risk of self-harm or suicide and act accordingly to keep the child safe.



Think Online Safety

Content, contact, conduct and commerce – consider all four dimensions of online risk.



Don't View Issues in Isolation

The online issue and Ethan's mental health are connected. Respond to the whole picture, not just one part.



Keep the Child's Welfare at the Centre

Every decision made must keep the child's welfare and protection at the heart of the safeguarding response.



A child saying that someone online is encouraging them to harm themselves must never be dismissed as simply an 'online issue'. The combination of emotional distress, self-harm thoughts, secrecy and potentially harmful online contact requires an immediate, child-centred safeguarding response.