

# Navigating safeguarding issues and parental complaints in the modern world

Winckworth  
Sherwood

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# Agenda

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## **This session will consider:**

- Are we rising to the challenge of protecting young people from modern safeguarding risks?
- New proposed guidance on gender questioning children
- Dealing with AI generated complaints from parents – the new frontier



Are we rising to the challenge of protecting young people from modern safeguarding risks?



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# The safeguarding context

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- Shocking death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 and the Soham murders in 2002 rightly led to widespread safeguarding reform, including in the education sector.
- Safeguarding became embedded in the fabric of many schools and there is an established culture of safeguarding in the education sector.
- There is more to be done – not just in schools – but high profile cases like Baby P, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, Star Hobson, Sara Sharif and, more recently, the Southport attacks show us that there are still gaps in the system and lessons to be learned.



# The modern context

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- The fundamental issues we have grappled with for over 2 decades have been top-spun by modern technological developments
- We have children being exposed to harmful content online: pornography (including child pornography), misogyny, misinformation, cyber-bullying, violence and weapons, extremism, deepfakes, content which promotes self-harm and suicide and children developing an emotional dependence related to chatbots.
- These issues are impacting schools on a daily basis.
- Some wider debate following programmes such as Adolescence, Inside the Manosphere and movements such as Smartphone Free Childhood and campaigns and cases, for example, Molly Russell.

# Are schools equipped to deal with these challenges?

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- Do schools have the resources available to respond to the volume of safeguarding issues?
- Are we doing enough to protect school resources?
- Is there adequate support from external agencies?
- Is more specialist training needed to help schools to identify risks and manage them?





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# Upcoming changes to safeguarding – Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill

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Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill – in the final stages of approval. Contains a number of safeguarding measures e.g:

- Strengthens the role of education in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.
- Education and childcare settings to become a statutory safeguarding partner.
- A new duty will require safeguarding partners to enable the representation of education and childcare settings’ views in respect of the operational and strategic priorities set out in the local safeguarding arrangements.
- Establish multi-agency child protection teams (MACPTs) to support the local authority in the discharge of its child protection duties. Integrated teams of child protection experts will deliver specific child protection activities, which will be set out in regulations this will include a social worker, police officer, healthcare professional and person with education experience.



# Upcoming changes to safeguarding – Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill

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- A requirement for local authorities to keep a register of children not in school.
- Amendments to the Bill that schools “**must have regard to**” guidance issued by the Secretary of State about registered pupils at schools having mobile phones and other personal interactive communication devices with them, and using them (a) during school hours, and (b) on school premises. “All schools should be mobile phone-free environments by default” – NB exceptions where reasonable adjustments are required.



# Consultation on ‘Growing up in an online world’

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- Ongoing consultation on ‘Growing up in the online world: a national consultation’: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation>
- Closes 26 May 2026
- Addresses big questions about how young people should access online services e.g. whether social media services should have a minimum age of access, whether certain features (e.g. infinite scrolling and autoplay) should be age restricted, questions about parental control and how young people engage with AI e.g.

*“As chatbots become more embedded in children’s lives, it is vital to understand these risks and ensure their interactions remain healthy and developmentally appropriate. Internet Matters recently found that 64% of 9–17-year-olds use AI chatbots. Of those, 23% have turned to chatbots for advice, and 1 in 8 (12%) say they use them because they have no one else to talk to.” Extract from the ‘Growing up in the online world: a national conversation’ consultation*



# Other safeguarding developments

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- **Working Together to Safeguard Children updated in March 2026** – now 176 pages.
- **Operation Encompass put on a statutory footing in 2025** – police forces have a legal duty to notify a child's educational establishment if they have reasonable grounds to believe that a child may be a victim of domestic abuse. (Does not replace statutory safeguarding procedures or referrals.) Details about the advice line available in KCSIE.

# Proposed updates to Keeping Children Safe in Education

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- The Government has recently consulted on changes to KCSIE.
- The consultation closed on 22 April 2026.
- The draft that went out for consultation was 201 pages long.
- Proposal to remove Annex A and require all staff to read Part 1
- There are some significant changes e.g. gender questioning children, strengthened guidance on the intersection between Harmful Sexual Behaviour and misogyny, updated guidance on mental health.




# Proposed updates to Keeping Children Safe in Education

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## In addition:

1. Detailed guidance on safeguarding issues arising in cases of child-on-child serious violence - schools will need to be much more attuned to joining up behaviour and safeguarding.
2. More guidance on the timely transfer of child protection files and DSLs sharing information
3. Guidance on AI - signposts to Generative artificial intelligence (AI) in education and online resources.



A classroom scene with a globe on the left, three green apples in the foreground, and three children sitting at desks in the background. The text 'New guidance on gender questioning children' is overlaid in the center.

# New guidance on gender questioning children



# Gender questioning children

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**Background:** Conservative government consultation in 2024. Strong reaction – over 15k responses. Draft guidance not implemented.

In January 2024 we issued a blog which emphasised:

- Decisions taken must be based on a school's legal obligations, including under the Equality Act 2010 and KCSIE
- Establish an internal committee to consider individual cases including staff such as SENCO and DSL – joined up approach
- Document decisions and keep under review.



# Gender questioning children

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- This government have opted to include its guidance in KCSIE
- New sections on single sex spaces and single sex sports
- New detailed guidance on supporting gender questioning children
- Some principles:
  - Schools have statutory duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils – what is in the best interests of the child and other children?
  - Parents should be involved in the vast majority of cases – in rare cases where there is a greater risk seek advice from the DSL and SENCO.
  - There is an emphasis on early clinical involvement in certain cases.
  - Schools should take a very careful approach to social transition.
  - Schools should comply with the Equality Act and the HRA when considering requests for social transition. There's a reminder of the School Premises Regulations and the ISS Regs. Express reference to 'constraints' e.g. schools must not allow gender questioning pupils into toilets, changing rooms or boarding or residential accommodation for the opposite sex with no exceptions. Similar guidance in place for single sex sports.
  - Ensure decision making processes are documented and records are kept.
  - Keep decisions under review.

A blurred classroom scene featuring children in the background, a globe on the left, and school supplies like notebooks and markers in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# Dealing with AI generated complaints from parents – the new frontier

# Parental engagement with schools

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- Shifting relationship between schools and parents
- Widely recognised that there is an increase in complaints and communications from parents
- Questions about how we reset the relationship between schools and parents.
- The White Paper includes proposals on improving parental engagement - we await further details.

# Responding to parental communications generated using AI

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- It's been well documented that parents are increasingly using AI to generate communications to schools – noticeable increase in the last 6-8 months.
- For some parents, AI can make complaints processes more accessible and help them to articulate their concerns.
- The tone and content of the correspondence is quite distinctive.
- It often creates extra work as the communication often makes demands which are not compatible with a school's policies.
- A common feature is that they are often styled as a 'Letter Before Action' and threaten schools with legal proceedings.
- Where possible, schools should try to de-escalate and encourage the parent to engage through other means but the approach will depend on the circumstances. Notify your insurers / RPA if proceedings are threatened.
- Schools should be vigilant in case parents proceed with issuing a claim. Notify your legal advisors and insurers without delay in case prompt action is needed to protect the school's position.



# What can schools do?

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## Update complaints policies:

- Discourage the use of AI / warn parents about the problems that can occur when AI is used.
- Explain that courts are there as a last resort and explain that Judge's expect parties to explore alternatives before resorting to legal action.
- Consider adding that there is a risk of costs orders being obtained against the parent if legal proceedings are brought where they have no merit
- Ask parents to refrain from making repeated threats of legal action and threatening to escalate to third party regulators – explain that the school will engage with regulators should they contact you.

# Extreme cases

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- Schools have a duty of care towards staff – *offer support, employee assistance programmes etc.*
- Put a marker down about tone / nature of correspondence.
- Consider appointing an external investigator.
- Some cases can cross the line into criminal behaviour e.g. *harassment, malicious communications etc.*
- Schools may need to involve the Police and / or the statutory agencies if there are safeguarding concerns or concerns for the safety of staff. Needs to be a reasonable and proportionate response.
- Schools can ban parents from school premises and put communications protocols in place (these need to be nuanced – seek advice).

# Questions



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# THANK YOU

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