

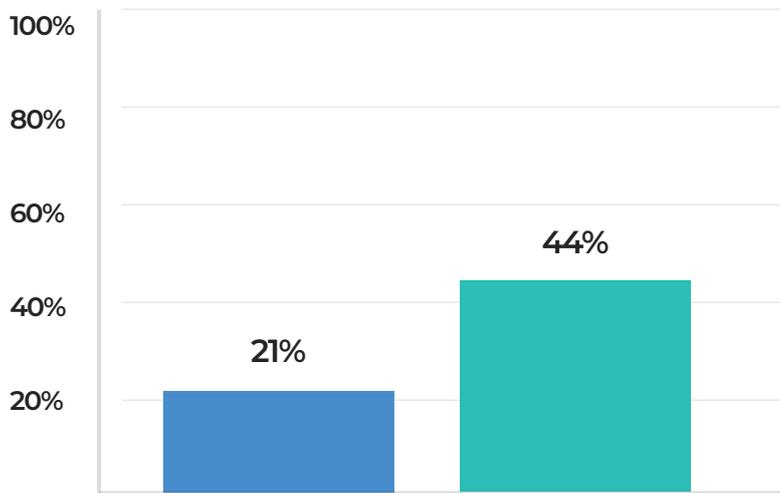


Online safety for schools

Today's challenges and attitudes

The internet plays an integral part in children and young people’s lives. And while numerous benefits come with exploring this digital world, there are also several risks.

For young people, being online was especially important in 2020. As schools closed and social distancing measures were implemented, the internet allowed them to continue their studies and use apps and games to help them stay connected with friends.



According to a report by Ofcom, released in April 2021, there was a sharp increase in social media usage amongst 8–11-year-olds from 21% (2019) to 44% (2020)¹

■ 2019
■ 2020

Usage of social media amongst 8-11-year-olds

The same report also highlighted the growing popularity of video-sharing platforms and a jump in the number of children and young people owning their own devices. This change in how the internet is used needs to be understood and monitored by educators so that students can navigate the online world safely.

As restrictions ease, it is vital that schools work closely with parents to help support and keep young people safe online, in and outside of school. But also, that school leaders provide staff with appropriate resources and guidance to help them manage this period of change effectively. RM undertook some research with schools in Spring 2019, exploring how confident school leaders, designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and IT network managers felt about keeping children safe online and provisions in place to assist with this. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, we felt it was timely to rerun similar research, this time surveying both school staff and parents on these topics.



¹https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf

Exploring the risks

Some of the risks for children and young people during the pandemic have increased, and there have been some grim statistics, especially those relating to child sexual abuse online.

Schools have been required to protect children from content, contact and conduct-related risks online. A fourth category was recently added, commerce. This requires schools to take steps to protect students from gambling and phishing related risks. According to the DfE's "[Keeping children safe in education](#)" guidance, the four risks are defined as follows.

- **content:** being exposed to illegal, inappropriate or harmful content, for example: pornography, fake news, racism, misogyny, self-harm, suicide, anti-Semitism, radicalisation and extremism.
- **contact:** being subjected to harmful online interaction with other users; for example: peer to peer pressure, commercial advertising and adults posing as children or young adults with the intention to groom or exploit them for sexual, criminal, financial or other purposes.
- **conduct:** personal online behaviour that increases the likelihood of, or causes, harm; for example, making, sending and receiving explicit images (e.g consensual and non-consensual sharing of nudes and semi-nudes and/or pornography, sharing other explicit images and online bullying; and
- **commerce:** risks such as online gambling, inappropriate advertising, phishing and or financial scams. If you feel your pupils, students, or staff are at risk, please report it to the Anti-Phishing Working Group.

Protecting children and young people in a school context is essential, whether that's online or offline. Environments need to be risk assessed, and the appropriate mitigations put in place to protect students and staff whilst also providing an effective educational programme.

The effective approach is a whole-school approach

Schools should adopt a whole-school approach to online safety. The DfE guidance titled "[Teaching online safety in school](#)", published in 2019, gives a detailed account of what a whole-school approach involves. The guidance states, "A whole-school approach is one that goes beyond teaching to include all aspects of school life, including culture, ethos, environment and partnerships with families and the community."

The pandemic and the demands of remote learning delivery have since added an additional layer of complexity. However, the same principles still apply.

An effective whole-school approach to online safety includes:

- mechanisms to identify and intervene in any threatening situations
- effective escalation routes
- regularly reviewed policies and procedures
- appropriate filtering and monitoring systems
- an online safety education programme that supports the whole school community

The policy context

The Ofsted Review – Peer on Peer abuse

In May 2021, Ofsted was asked by the Government to conduct a review into peer-on-peer sexual abuse in schools.

Ofsted review findings:

- Sexual harassment and online sexual abuse were the two most commonly experienced forms of abuse.
- The vast majority of girls indicated that harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) happened 'sometimes' or 'a lot'.
- Among the most commonly reported behaviours were - sexist name-calling and being sent or coerced into sharing sexual images.
- Children talked about teachers being out of touch.
- Overall, they felt safe at school, but there was a clear emotional impact, especially on girls.
- Online sexual harassment significantly affected the normalisation of HSB and unhealthy cultures in school.
- Children rarely talk to adults. They prefer to talk to friends. Among the reasons for were not knowing what would happen, reputational damage, the reaction from adults, confidentiality, so common no point in reporting, embarrassment and shame.
- Schools still rely on reporting.
- Some schools are responding to incidents in an isolated way.
- Leaders are unclear about the scope of their responsibilities.
- Most schools had annual training, but training on HSB was piecemeal.
- Children were seldom positive about their RSHE and PSHE lessons.
- A gap in guidance from LSPs.

Ofsted review key recommendations for schools

- Schools should develop a culture where all kinds of sexual harassment are recognised and addressed, including sanctions where appropriate .
- The RSHE curriculum should be carefully managed to spend time on sensitive topics like image sharing and consent.
- High-quality training for teachers delivering RSHE.
- Improved arrangements between multi-agency safeguarding partners.



The DfE's 'Keeping children safe in education' 2022 guidance for schools highlights

- DSL is responsible for online safety. This responsibility cannot be delegated.
- The DSL can be supported by others.
- DSLs should evidence that they have had additional training.
- Particular reference is placed on SEND children.
- All staff, governors and trustees should be trained in online safety at the induction stage.
- Children should be taught about online safety as part of RSE.
- Policies should specifically address online safety.
- 'Three Cs' have become four with the addition of commerce.
- Governors should regularly review the effectiveness of their school's online filtering and monitoring systems.

Relationship and Sex Education

Relationship and sex education has been mandatory in schools since September 2021 and should include online safety.

The DfE statutory guidance 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education' states:

The principles of positive relationships also apply online especially as, by the end of primary school, many children will already be using the internet. When teaching relationships content, teachers should address online safety and appropriate behaviour in a way that is relevant to pupils' lives. Teachers should include content on how information and data is shared and used in all contexts, including online; for example, sharing pictures, understanding that many websites are businesses and how sites may use information provided by users in ways they might not expect.

Online safety is front and centre of the policy context for schools. Schools must implement effective risk mitigation approaches and educate the whole school community about the risks.

What schools told us in 2021

We asked schools and parents various questions about their approach to online safety. This is what we found:

Responses from

1121

schools across
the UK

579

parents across
the UK



**Designated
Safeguarding Leads**



SLT



**Network
managers**

Schools were asked about key areas of their online safety provision

- Their policies.
- How they handle incidents.
- The education, training and support they provide to all their stakeholders.
- How they review and manage their approach to online safety.

Parents were asked about

- Whether or not they used parental controls.
- How they were supported in relation to online safety advice.
- How often they discuss and talk to their children about online safety.

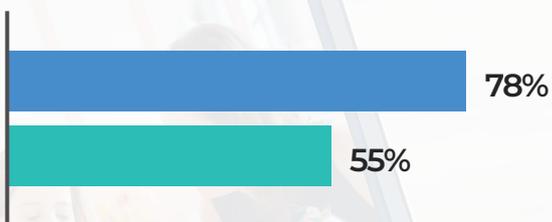
How are children currently kept safe?

- Respondents felt that parents and carers (44%) were the most important in terms of influence in keeping children safe solely followed by schools (40%).
- In contrast parents and carers and schools had differing views about the influence on children. Parents thought that the most important influence was school (43%) and schools thought the most important influence was parents (44%).

How do schools and parents communicate?

All the schools surveyed provided advice to parents and carers on social media use;

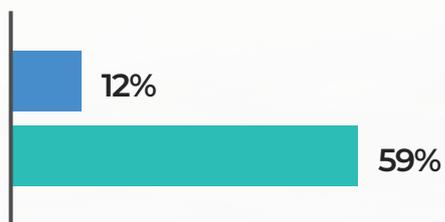
Schools provided communication



- 78% of them provided links to national agencies for further support.
- 55% of them provided tips and advice.

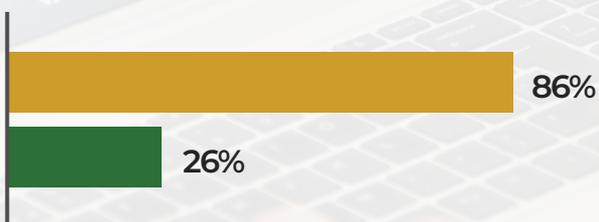
■ Via national agencies ■ Via social media

Parents received communication



- In contrast, only 12% of parents said that their school provided links to national agencies.
- 59% said that they had had advice on social media use.

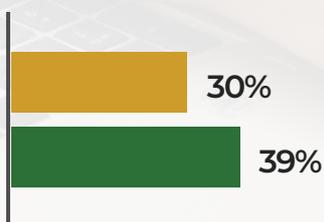
Via Newsletters



86% of teachers felt that information in newsletters would be the most effective way of supporting parents, whilst only 26% of parents agreed.

■ Teachers ■ Parents

Via Printed materials



Parents felt that printed materials (39%) would be the most effective, whilst only 30% of DSLs agreed.

■ DSLs ■ Parents

Parents also thought that parents' evenings would be a relatively effective (29%) way of improving their understanding of online safety issues.

How do schools handle online safety incidents?

- Most schools said they were very confident or somewhat confident in handling issues only 4% said that they were not at all confident.
- Schools said that in terms of managing incidents, the area that they struggled most with was reporting incidents online, followed by the handling of pupils making a disclosure.

How are parents/staff and students educated and trained in online safety issues?

- Over half of schools surveyed received online safety training annually, and schools thought that learning support assistants would benefit most from more online safety training.
- Schools stayed up to date through organisations like NCA CEOP (80%), the NSPCC and their MAT.

What are schools' levels of confidence in dealing with online safety issues?

- Levels of confidence were the same regardless of the frequency of training. Overall secondary schools were more confident in their approach than primary schools.
- 21% of primary and 20% of secondary schools said they were not confident in their approach.

How do parents support their children online?

- Parents were only slightly more concerned about their children during the pandemic.
- Many more parents were having more frequent conversations with their children about online safety.
- 42% of parents had no parental controls on their children's devices, but where they did the most popular was their tablet/smartphone.

Conclusions

There are clearly differences in what parents/carers think about their children online and what schools and teachers think. Essentially all parties are committed to keeping children safer, but schools and parents need to better understand each other's needs.

It's important that schools ask parents how they want to be communicated with and not just assume that the old methods will work. They should understand what parents are concerned about and work with them on this topic. Conversely, parents should not solely rely on schools to educate their children on issues related to online safety. This is a collaborative approach, especially where there is an incident and the consequences are brought back into the school context and everyone feels the impact.