

## Safeguarding Bulletin Spring Half Term 2026

Happy New Year and whilst they may seem like a dim and distant memory, we are hurtling towards another half term break.

Here is a roundup of some of the key articles in the world of safeguarding and well-being. I hope these will be of interest to you. As always, please remember, if any of the articles raise any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact your child's pastoral team.

### Man Targeting Male Students on WhatsApp

Police in Manchester have put out a warning about a man who has been targeting male students on WhatsApp. It appears that he has been added into a number of chat groups and is then able to contact students individually.

Although this has been reported in Manchester, the reality is that children and young people can (and are being) targeted anywhere. There are no geographical boundaries when it comes to 'online'.

This is a timely reminder to reiterate to all students that they should not admit people they don't know into chat groups, this is an easy gateway for offenders who prey on curiosity and vulnerability.

### For Parents - Google Family Link

For children with Android devices, Google Family Link is a great way for parents to set restrictions. Last week Internet Matters released a brand new YouTube video showing how to set up Google Family Link to customise content and screen time restrictions:

Click to [Set Up Google Family Link](#)

### More than a third of children confiding in AI chatbots

[The Times](#) [London Evening Standard](#) [The Independent UK](#)

Research commissioned by Vodafone has found that 81% of 11-to-16-year-olds have used AI chatbots - with 37% having confided in a chatbot and with one in three having shared information with a chatbot that they would not tell their parents, teachers or friends. The survey's findings have sparked concerns, with child psychologist Dr Elly Hanson saying chatbots' ability to mimic "human empathy, personality and connection" is "leading many children and young people to feel like chatbots are their friends and is interfering with their social development". Gary Moore, head teacher at Regent High School in London, commented: "The rule 101 when it comes to safeguarding is you don't keep secrets. Who's telling the chatbot not to keep a secret if I'm having suicidal thoughts or if I'm confiding that I've been abused, where's that information going?"

### **Children fear being targeted by AI deepfakes**

[The Independent UK](#)

Research commissioned by the UK Safer Internet Centre and Nominet, to mark Safer Internet Day, has found that 12% of children aged 13-17 have seen their peers use AI to create deepfake sexual images and videos of other people, while 60% of eight to 17-year-olds are concerned about AI being used to make inappropriate images of them - concerns shared by 65% of parents. Around a third of parents were also concerned about the impact of AI on their children's cognitive development and creativity. Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the NEU, said young people "are already using AI at an unprecedented rate", yet "the evidence is clear that the risks of AI use in education, particularly for young people's learning and development, overshadow the benefits". The Government, he said, must "act urgently to ensure that children have the information, support and resources they need to make informed, safe and ethical decisions about AI".

### **Children's Commissioner calls for crackdown on 'appearance-changing products'**

[Sky News](#)

The Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, has called for a ban on social media advertising for appearance-changing products and procedures, with a new report showing that more than half of young girls have seen online ads for products like filler and botox, while two in five have seen ads for prescription-only weight loss drugs despite an existing advertising ban. Dame Rachel warned: "Extreme and potentially dangerous appearance-changing products are being normalised to children through advertising, influencer culture and online posts, despite many of these products being unsafe, illegal or strictly age-restricted."

### **Parents must 'let go' and stop tracking children**

[The Sunday Times](#)

The head teacher of Fulham Boys School, one of the country's best performing schools, has urged parents to "let go" and resist the impulse to track their children's movements using smartphones. David Smith, who introduced a smartphone ban at the free school in 2024, said "we've become obsessed with the idea that something could go wrong", and said the school has tried to encourage pupils to be less reliant on their phones - such as by asking for directions in local shops. "We can't", he said, "have a generation so reliant on something that when it is taken away, for example if their phone battery dies, they don't know what to do."

## Study - The Gender Gap

Last week Internet Matters released their new study as part of their Digital Wellbeing index. This is now in its fourth year and is an annual UK household survey of 1,000 children aged 9-16. This time Internet Matters are looking at the online lives of children through the lens of gender, exploring how boys and girls spend their time online, what harms they are encountering and how they respond to it.

There is lots of really useful information in the report, some of the key findings are:

- The difference between boys' and girls' online lives are becoming less pronounced in terms of time spent on social media.
- Girls are more likely to encounter online harm and experience more distress.
- Girls are more likely to talk to someone, boys are more likely to take action on the platform.
- Parents of boys are particularly worried about loneliness.

Here is the Internet Matters [The Gender Gap](#) report.

## House of Lords backs social media ban for children

[The Daily Telegraph](#) [Daily Mirror](#) [The Times](#) [BBC News](#) [London Evening Standard](#)

Sir Keir Starmer faces mounting pressure to introduce an immediate social media ban for under-16s after the House of Lords voted decisively for an amendment mandating one, overturning the Government's plan for a three-month consultation. The move now heads to the Commons, where many Labour MPs support a ban, raising the prospect of a backbench rebellion unless ministers whip against it. Critics in the Lords called the consultation a delaying tactic, arguing children face urgent online harms. Supporters cited Australia's approach, including robust age verification, while some charities warned of unintended consequences, such as pushing children to riskier platforms. The *Daily Telegraph* says that with opposition parties backing a ban and previous rebellions forcing policy reversals, the vote could compel the Prime Minister to act sooner than planned.

## Mental health issues contribute to rise in homeschooling

[The Sunday Times](#)

Mental health issues have contributed significantly to the recent rise in homeschooling in England, as official numbers show a 38% increase in students since 2022. Blackpool, which has high rates of deprivation and mental health concerns, has one of the highest percentages of home-schooled children in the UK (2.6%). Parents find the flexibility of home education beneficial, as it allows for a more personalised learning approach. However, concerns remain about the lack of regulation of home schooling, particularly in deprived areas. Reports suggest that homeschooling children with behavioural problems and low prior attainment could potentially widen educational inequalities. While some parents adapt well, others express worries over the absence of oversight and support systems for vulnerable children. Recent tragic cases have prompted calls for tighter controls, such as a national register for home-schooled children.

## UK loses measles elimination status

[Sky News](#) [BBC News](#) [BBC News](#) [London Evening Standard](#) [Mirror.co.uk](#) [The Guardian](#) [The Independent UK](#)

The World Health Organization (WHO) has announced that the UK has lost its measles elimination status, with the change in status prompted by a spike of 3,600 suspected cases in 2024, and by a decline in vaccination rates below the 95% level needed to ensure herd immunity. As of the end of 2024, vaccine uptake rates were at 92% for the first dose and almost 85% for the second dose. Dr Vanessa Saliba from the UK Health Security Agency said infections "can return quickly when childhood vaccine uptake falls - measles elimination is only possible if all eligible children receive two MMRV doses before school", adding that the NHS "is making vaccination easier, including offering the second MMRV dose earlier at a new 18-month appointment to boost uptake and support elimination goals". Elsewhere, an NHS pilot backed by Somerset Council is offering home visits to vaccinate children in rural areas in order to improve vaccination rates.

## Work tsar warns of 'lost generation on benefits'

[The Times](#)

Britain is consigning a generation of young people with common mental health conditions to long-term welfare dependency, according to Alan Milburn, the government's work tsar. He warned of a "lost generation" of almost 1m 16- to 24-year-olds not in employment, education or training, arguing that successive governments have prioritised older voters over the young, creating a moral, social and economic crisis. Nearly a third of Neets are signed off for sickness or disability, largely for mental health or autism, though Milburn said conditions such as anxiety and depression were widespread and should not preclude work. He criticised what he described as a "downward escalator" from school special needs diagnoses into lifelong benefits, warning that early detachment from work sharply reduces future employment prospects

## Experts sound alarm on screen time

[The Sunday Telegraph](#) [The Observer](#) [The Sunday Times](#) [BBC News](#)

Britain's leading medical professionals have declared a "public health emergency" regarding the impact of screen time and harmful online content on children's health. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has alerted ministers after a meeting highlighted alarming cases seen in NHS clinics. Dr Zara Haider noted that dangerous behaviours, influenced by online pornography, are becoming normalised. Meanwhile, senior figures in intelligence and counter-terrorism are urging the Prime Minister to ban social media for under-16s to enhance national security. Jonathan Hall, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, highlighted that 20% of terrorism arrests last year involved individuals under 18. He said: "Terrorism content offers excitement, meaning and clarity, and teenage brains are unable to deal with it." Separately, Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, opposes a proposed ban on social media for under-16s, warning it could increase risks for children. Russell, who launched The Molly Rose Foundation, a suicide prevention charity named after his daughter, argues that such bans would relieve social media companies of their responsibility to ensure safety.

## **NHS to investigate social media's role in kid mental health crises**

*Daily Telegraph*

Thousands of teenagers will participate in a pioneering trial in Bradford that limits their social media use to one hour a day and imposes a complete restriction from 9pm to 7am, aimed at improving mental health. Researchers from the NHS and Cambridge University will monitor changes in anxiety, sleep quality, and overall wellbeing during the six-week study. The trial, which will employ a research app to restrict access to platforms like TikTok and Instagram, follows discussions with teenagers expressing concerns about social media's impact on real-life relationships. Peer support is growing for legislative measures to protect children from potential harms associated with excessive social media use.

## **Doctors warn of 'public health emergency' around online content**

*Sky News The Times Daily Mail*

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has urged Health Secretary Wes Streeting and Science and Technology Secretary Liz Kendall to take urgent action over a "public health emergency" caused by children's exposure to harmful online content, including extreme pornography and violent videos. The academy's chair, Dr Jeanette Dickson, said doctors are "seeing the beginning of a public health emergency with our own eyes", and expressed particular concern for children, "some of whom are self-evidently imprisoned in a digital bubble". "There are encouraging signs that the Government is beginning to listen to us and the public on this", she said, "but we don't need any more academic studies to confirm what most of us see every day, in the streets, on the bus and in cafés."

## **Online Grooming (Breck Foundation)**

In February 2014, 14-year-old Breck Bednar from Surrey was groomed online by an 18-year-old male he met through gaming. Over several months, the older individual manipulated Breck into trusting him and distancing himself from his family. Breck was lured to a flat under false pretences and was fatally stabbed. The offender later pleaded guilty and received a life sentence with a minimum term of 25 years.

Following Breck's death, his mother set up the Breck Foundation in his memory to raise awareness of online grooming, exploitation and digital risk, and to educate children, families and professionals so that other young people are better protected when using online spaces.

Today, the charity works nationally with schools, parents and professionals to improve understanding of online harm, gaming-related grooming and digital resilience, using Breck's story to help prevent similar tragedies and strengthen safeguarding practice around online safety.

Their website resources are available here: <https://www.breckfoundation.org>

## Surge in online child abuse cases

[The Guardian](#)

In 2024, England and Wales recorded 122,768 child sexual exploitation offences, a 6% increase from the previous year. Online abuse surged by 26%, with 51,672 cases reported, representing 42% of total offences. Becky Riggs, acting chief constable of Staffordshire police, urged tech companies to implement AI tools to prevent indecent content sharing. She stated: "These platforms could prevent these harms from occurring." The NSPCC highlighted that only 1 in 10 crimes are reported, calling for a national prevalence study to better understand the issue.

## Grooming gangs adapt to online tactics

[Sunday Express](#)

Marcus Johnstone, a lawyer with 20 years of experience in sexual offence cases, has warned that grooming gangs in Britain have shifted their tactics online. He states that every girl with a smartphone is now at risk, as predators exploit encrypted apps and chat rooms to target victims. Johnstone highlights a case where a groomer lured a 14-year-old girl under the guise of providing respite from her care home. The National Crime Agency's Operation Beaconport aims to reinvestigate 1,273 cases of group-based child sexual abuse, revealing a troubling trend in grooming gang behaviour. "The internet is now the primary facilitator," Johnstone said.

## Speech and language problems rise in children

[Daily Mirror](#)

Speech and language issues among children are escalating due to poverty, the COVID pandemic, and increased screen time, warns Jane Harris, Chief Executive of Speech and Language UK. She stated that one in five children now struggles with these challenges, with many lacking the necessary support to communicate effectively. Harris emphasised that these issues affect children's ability to learn and form friendships. She advocates for improved training for teachers and more specialist hubs in schools to address the crisis. After years of demands from parents, teachers, and professionals, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson is overhauling the SEND system in crisis.