



# Online Safety for Learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Advice and guidance for  
schools and education settings

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# Online Safety for Learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

This guidance has been written by the Education Safeguarding Service to support Designated Safeguarding Leads and curriculum leads with a responsibility for online safety in education settings. This guidance aims to provide advice and guidance to better support pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) with Online Safety Education.

*“Any pupil can be vulnerable online, and their vulnerability can fluctuate depending on their age, developmental stage and personal circumstance. However there are some pupils, for example looked after children and those with special educational needs, who may be more susceptible to online harm or have less support from family or friends in staying safe online. Schools should consider how they tailor their offer to ensure these pupils receive the information and support they need.”*

*Teaching Online Safety in Schools 2019*

## What is Different for Learners With SEND?

The internet and technology are an integral part of everyday life for children. It is important that we acknowledge the positive opportunities the internet provides for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); the accessibility of images and video online make it an excellent learning tool, whilst global connectivity enables children with SEND to socialise and access support.

However, children with SEND can be at increased risk online due to their [vulnerability](#); they can be more likely than their peers to experience online issues such as scams, cyberbullying, online grooming and exploitation. Similarly, children with SEND are more likely to have their internet use restricted or be provided with differentiated education. Therefore, they have limited opportunities to learn through practical experience, develop resilience or seek support which could empower them to use technology safely.

Online safety is a fundamental part of our safeguarding responsibilities and education settings should implement a range of targeted and differentiated strategies to enable learners with SEND to access the internet safely and appropriately.

## Online safety messages

For some learners, the use of abstract language and concepts can lead to confusion, frustration, and misunderstandings. It is important that settings work together with their learners to build and develop a collaborative understanding of the terminology being used.

### Consider:

- *What does the term 'online predator' mean to a child with SEND? Is it a dangerous person or a wild animal?*
- *Is an online contact still a stranger if you know their name or they send a 'friend request'?*
- *If you must never share personal information online, how do you tell online shops where to deliver your orders?*

Be mindful that there are usually exceptions to rules which can sometimes be difficult for children with SEND to accept; ensure the 'rules' you provide are clear, consistent and not left open to interpretation.

### Examples:

- *A learner who finds it difficult to understand abstract meaning may not be able to interpret hidden messages or metaphors in many popular video resources.*
- *Instead of saying: "Don't share personal information online", consider a more realistic statement: "Always ask your trusted adult, before sharing personal information online"*

## Education and training

Online safety education should be delivered in an age and context appropriate way, based on learner needs and experiences. Staff should establish what learners already know about online safety and how much experience or exposure they have to the online environment.

*Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) should access appropriate training and guidance regarding online safety. Training should provide DSLs with a good understanding of their own role, how to identify, understand and respond to specific needs that can increase the vulnerability of children, as well as specific harms that can put children at risk, and the processes, procedures and responsibilities of other agencies, particularly children's social care, so they:*

- are able to understand the unique risks associated with online safety and be confident that they have the relevant knowledge and up to date capability required to keep children safe whilst they are online at school or college.*
- can recognise the additional risks that children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) face online, for example, from online bullying, grooming and radicalisation and are confident they have the capability to support children with SEND to stay safe online.*

### *Annex C, Keeping Children Safe in Education*

Part Two of Keeping Children Safe in Education identifies that governing bodies and proprietors should ensure that children are taught about safeguarding, including online safety, but should recognise that a one size fits all approach may not be appropriate for all children, and a more personalised or contextualised approach for SEND children might be needed.

The DfE have published 'Teaching Online Safety in Schools' provides some additional content as well as general recommended educational approaches.

### **Consider:**

- What online experiences do your learners with SEND already have?*
- Can your learners identify and/or explain online safety risks?*
- Can your learners understand and remember online safety messages?*
- Has your DSL accessed appropriate training regarding the specific risks to learners with SEND online?*

Many learners with SEND will want to engage in the same activities as their peers, but may lack the understanding, skills, or support to do so safely. Education settings, with the support of parents/carers, should implement a small step approach to online access, enabling learners to develop experiences and build resilience in the online environment.

Online safety education should not just take place within computing lessons but should form part of an embedded and progressive curriculum, including appropriate PSHE and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). One-off events or assemblies, provided by external visitors, cannot be as effective as directed, differentiated teaching which addresses the specific needs and vulnerabilities of your learners.

When teaching about online safety, learners with SEND may need:

- Complex online safety issues to be broken down and explained in greater detail.
- To explore issues in a variety of contexts and approaches.
- More examples of safe and unsafe practices.
- Constant reinforcement and repetition of key safety messages.
- Differentiated teaching resources and materials.

Visual resources and verbal support can be useful for learners with SEND, but some learners may respond better to multi-media content such as videos, interactive presentations, screensavers, or spoken/ sound recordings that they can associate with 'good' or 'bad' decisions. ['Know your friends with Josh and Sue'](#) is an illustrated video from CEOP which uses clear facial expressions and visual clues to communicate basic online safety rules. Try to use a variety of resources and see what works or adapt and use teaching resources you know work for your learners.

### **Examples:**

- *When delivering lessons about privacy and security settings on social media, consider using actual websites and allowing learners to explore the real tools.*
- *A learner with hearing impairment will benefit from adapted education material, such as, videos with subtitles or British Sign Language.*

## Acceptable use rules

Education settings should provide clear boundaries and expectations for appropriate internet use for all staff, learners and parents; however, the way in which we communicate these 'rules' to learners with SEND may need to be adapted. Some learners with SEND may intentionally test boundaries and contravene the rules; consider presenting consequences alongside the rules (i.e., cause and effect).

### Consider:

- *Do all learners recognise and understand safe and unsafe behaviour online?*
- *Can they transfer rules about safety, or skills, from one activity and apply it to the online environment?*
- *Are there appropriate boundaries and support networks for learners at school?*
- *Are there appropriate boundaries and positive role models for learners at home?*

Acceptable Use Policies (AUP) should be shared with parents/carers to ensure that rules and consequences are consistent at school and at home.

### Examples:

- *A learner who has difficulty transferring rules, or applying them out of context, may find constant reinforcement and visual reminders near devices helpful.*
- *A learner who is allowed unrestricted access to technology at home and intentionally tries to bypass school filters may require a strict AUP which is shared and supported by parents.*

Childnet has produced [SMART rules](#) for online safety, using Widget symbols; these can be displayed near computers/laptops as a visual reminder.

## Engaging parents and carers:

Parents and carers play a vital role in supporting their children learn how to be safe online, but they can sometimes be difficult to engage with; concerns about insufficient computer skills or a limited understanding about the online environment can be off-putting for many parents, regardless of whether their child has SEND or not.

### Consider:

- *Do all parents/carers understand the risks online and how to access support?*
- *Do all parents/carers know how to talk about online safety and support their child in accessing the internet safely?*
- *Are all parents/carers aware of the key online safety messages that are taught to pupils in school?*

Settings should reassure parents that online safety has more to do with parenting than technology; their child is likely to be vulnerable both on and offline, so encourage parents to adopt similar mechanisms for supporting their child online, as they use in the 'real' world.

### Examples:

- *A parent assumes that their child is not physically or mentally capable of accessing the internet, so does not implement blocks or filters.*
- *A parent is frightened that their child will be an easy target online, so bans internet access, restricting their child's ability to learn and develop online resilience.*
- *A parent assumes that their child, who is very technology literate, knows how to keep themselves safe, so does not actively discuss online safety rules.*

Both professionals and parents should take an active interest in children with SEND online activities and talk to them regularly about what they do online. Creating an open and positive dialogue about technology will encourage learners to speak to an adult if something negative happens online.

General advice and ideas to engage parents/carers in online safety are available to Education Safeguarding Support Package Members via their resource library. However, due to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children with SEND, education settings will need to supplement this with their own expert knowledge and targeted resources.

## Policies and procedures:

The DSL should work with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and other appropriate staff, to develop and review the online safeguarding policies, ensuring the specific needs and requirements of learners with SEND are met.

### Consider:

- *What are the specific needs and abilities of learners with SEND within your setting?*
- *How might their needs increase their vulnerabilities online?*
- *What actions can be taken to minimise risks online for learners with SEND?*
- *Are these needs and actions reflected within the policies and procedures?*

It is not necessary to develop bespoke policies for learners with SEND, but it is important to ensure that these documents are accessible. Are our expectations within our Acceptable use Policy, for example, clear enough for all pupils to understand or do they need to be communicated in a different way?

If settings identify individual learners with specific online safety concerns, this could be incorporated into their Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.

### Examples:

- *A learner with autism who becomes fixated on online material may require additional monitoring and supervision (particularly if the material is likely to cause them harm, such as pornography or terrorist material).*
- *A learner with visual impairment may require screen adaptations and more verbal support when accessing the internet.*

## Technology and infrastructure:

'Keeping Children Safe in Education' states that schools have a responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and provide them with a safe environment in which to learn and this includes a safe online environment. Schools should be doing all that they reasonably can to limit children's exposure to online risks they may encounter when using school devices or systems; to achieve this schools should ensure they have appropriate filtering and monitoring systems in place and regularly review their effectiveness.

What is deemed "appropriate" filtering and monitoring will depend on the specific needs, abilities, and vulnerabilities of the learners within your setting; leaders and managers should conduct a risk assessment to build a risk profile for your school which can be used to inform policy or identify any practice changes required. The [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) has guidance available for education leaders regarding implementing appropriate filtering and monitoring. To support schools, the Department for Education has also published [filtering and monitoring standards](#).

The appropriateness of filtering and monitoring systems are a matter for individual schools, however KCSIE identifies schools will need to consider those children and young people who are potentially at greater risk of harm; this is likely to include children with SEND.

Whilst it is essential to ensure that appropriate filtering and monitoring systems are in place, schools should be careful that "over blocking" does not lead to unreasonable restrictions as to what children can be taught with regards to online teaching and safeguarding.

### Consider:

- *What are the specific needs of learners with SEND within your setting?*
- *Are any learners with SEND at greater risk of harm? If so, how/why?*
- *What devices do learners with SEND have access to in your setting? How often do they go online? How are they supervised?*
- *Are the filtering systems appropriate to safeguarding learners with SEND?*
- *Are the monitoring systems appropriate to safeguarding learners with SEND?*
- *How do you ensure/evidence devices learners with SEND have access to are being appropriately monitored?*
- *Is SENCO input sought when considering appropriate filtering and monitoring systems in your school?*

### Examples:

- *Learners who lack the ability to regulate their own behaviour online may require closer supervision and instruction.*
- *Learners who are unable to recognise or manage online risks may require direct adult supervision (at least initially) to safeguard them.*

## Reporting concerns:

Education settings should be conscious that, learners with SEND may require a range of methods to enable them to report concerns and seek support.

### Consider:

- *Are there appropriate reporting mechanisms in place to enable learners with SEND to raise concerns?*
- *Are the reporting mechanisms reflected within the online safety policy?*
- *Do all staff have appropriate training to respond to online safety concerns?*

Some learners with SEND may find it difficult to explain or describe things that have happened online; learners might find it easier to show adults what they did, whilst others may not actually know how something happened. Careful investigation by DSLs may be required with support as appropriate from technical staff.

### Examples:

- *A learner who is non-verbal, may require a messaging or sound system on their devices to help them to get adult attention.*
- *Learners may have 1-2-1 workers or trusted adults that they prefer to speak to who will be able to support the DSL in communicating with the learner.*

Educational settings should highlight external reporting systems, such as the [CEOP report button](#) or the [Childline website](#) and ensure learners understand when it would and wouldn't be appropriate to contact them.

# Useful links and additional information

## Teaching and education resources:

### Childnet:

- [www.childnet.com/resources/be-safe-and-smart-online](http://www.childnet.com/resources/be-safe-and-smart-online)
- [www.childnet.com/resources/star-send-toolkit](http://www.childnet.com/resources/star-send-toolkit)



### Think U Know:

- [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/resources/know-your-friends-with-josh-and-sue/](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/resources/know-your-friends-with-josh-and-sue/)



### NetSmartz:

- [www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/resources#classroom\\_mactivities](http://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/resources#classroom_mactivities)



### East Midlands e-Safety Project:

- <http://em-esafetyproject.co.uk/>



### Anti-Bullying Alliance:

- <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/at-risk-groups/sen-disability/online-bullying-and>



## Useful resources for parents/carers:

### Internet Matters:

- <https://www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety/>
- <https://www.internetmatters.org/connecting-safely-online/>



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