



Online Safety for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Advice and guidance for schools
and education settings

Online Safety for Children with SEND

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

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.

“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](#)

What is different for learners with SEND?

The internet is an integral part of everyday life for children, and it is important to acknowledge the wide variety of positive opportunities technology provides for young people with SEND; the accessibility of sound, images and video online make it an excellent learning and communication tool, whilst global connectivity enables children with SEND to socialise and access support.

However, children with SEND can be at increased risk online; [research](#) suggests they may be more likely than their peers to experience online harms such as scams, [cyberbullying](#), online grooming and exploitation. Children with SEND may also be more likely to have their internet use restricted or be provided with differentiated education, meaning they may have less opportunities to learn through practical experience and/or to develop resilience, or may have less access to support and education which could empower them to use technology safely.

- [Vulnerable children in a digital world report 2019](#)
- [Life online for children with SEND report 2020](#)
- [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index 2025](#)
- [Empowering vulnerable children online](#)

Online Safety for Children with SEND

Education and training

Online safety education should be delivered in an age and context appropriate way, based on learner needs and experiences. Staff, including DSLs, 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's '[Teaching Online Safety in Schools](#)' provides 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?*

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Many learners with SEND will want to engage in the same activities as their peers, but some 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 solely 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, or inputs provided by external visitors, will never be as effective as directed, differentiated teaching which addresses the specific needs and vulnerabilities of your learners.

When teaching about online safety, some 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 decisions. [‘Know your friends with Josh and Sue’](#) is an illustrated video from [NCA-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.*

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Online safety messages

For some learners, the use of abstract language and concepts can lead to confusion, frustration, and misunderstandings. Settings should work together with their learners and specialist teachers to 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, if you play the same games regularly, or they send a 'friend' request? What if they are a "friend of a friend"?*
- *What do we mean by "messages"? Does that just mean text, or does that include pictures, snaps, and voice notes? What about DMs or comments on social media?*
- *If you must "never share 'personal information' online", how do you order shopping online or get a takeaway delivered?*

Take into consideration children's lived experiences online; many children, with SEND and without, will have had considerable access to the internet and technology for most of their lives. For many, their time spent online is a fun, positive and comforting experience, so when the safety messages we provide are too risk averse and do not take into account the benefits of technology, or fairly reflect the experiences of our learners, we risk alienating them.

Also be mindful that there are usually exceptions to many of the typical online safety 'rules' we may rely on, which can sometimes be difficult for children with SEND to negotiate or accept; ensure the guidance provided is clear, consistent and not left open to interpretation.

Examples:

- *A learner who finds it difficult to understand abstract concepts may not be able to interpret hidden meanings or metaphors within educational 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"*

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Policies and procedures

The DSL should work with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and other appropriate staff to develop and review their settings online safeguarding policies to ensure the specific needs and requirements of their learners with SEND are considered and 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 separate safeguarding policies for learners with SEND, but it is important to ensure that documents are accessible, for example, are your expectations within acceptable use and/or learner behaviour policies clear enough for all learners to understand, or do they need to be communicated in a different way?

If settings identify individual learners who may be at risk of specific safety concerns online, this could be incorporated into their Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP).

Examples:

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

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Acceptable use

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.

As with all children, some learners with SEND may intentionally test boundaries and contravene the rules; educators should consider presenting consequences alongside the rules (i.e., cause and effect) but be mindful not to [victim blame](#) or rely on fear-based messages.

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 whilst at school/setting?*
- *Are there appropriate boundaries and positive role models for learners at home?*

Acceptable use behaviour policies should be shared with parents/carers to ensure that rules and consequences are consistent within the education setting 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 acceptable use policy 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.

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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. Education settings should be doing all that they reasonably can to limit children's exposure to online risks they may encounter when using school/setting provided devices or systems; to achieve this education settings 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 'unique risk profile' which can be used to inform policy or identify any practice changes required. The [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) has a range of guidance available for education leaders regarding understanding and implementing appropriate filtering and monitoring. The Department for Education has also published [filtering and monitoring standards](#) which schools and colleges should be meeting.

The appropriateness of filtering and monitoring systems are a matter for individual schools and settings, however KCSIE identifies that when making these decisions, education settings should consider children who are potentially at greater risk of harm, which will include children with SEND.

Additionally, whilst it is essential to ensure that appropriate filtering and monitoring systems are in place, settings 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 and evidence that all school/setting provided devices and systems that learners with SEND have access to are being appropriately monitored?*
- *Is SENCO or other specialist advice and input sought when making decisions regarding appropriate filtering and monitoring systems?*

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Examples:

- *Learners who are unable 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.*
- *Any 1:1 devices used by learners with SEND (for example, communication aids or tablets used to help children self-regulate) may need additional checks to ensure filtering and monitoring systems have been applied and are working as expected.*

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Engaging parents and carers

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

Consider:

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

Settings should reassure parents/carers that online safety has more to do with parenting than technology; their child may be vulnerable to risk, both on and offline, so encourage parents/carers to adopt similar mechanisms for supporting their child online, as they would offline.

Examples:

- *A parent assumes that their child is not physically or mentally capable of accessing the internet, so does not implementing parental controls or filters.*
- *A parent is frightened that their child will be an easy target online, so bans their 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 keep themselves safe, so does not actively discuss safe online behaviour or rules.*

Both professionals and parents/carers 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 their use of technology may help encourage learners to tell an adult if something negative happens online.

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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 specialist and/or 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 may wish to 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.

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Resources to support children, parents/carers and professionals

- [Teaching online safety in schools - GOV.UK](#)
- [Education for a Connected World - GOV.UK](#)
- [ProjectEVOLVE - Education for a Connected World Resources](#)
- [SEND - UK Safer Internet Centre](#)
- [Online safety for children with SEND | NSPCC](#)
- [Understanding Online Risks for SEND Students | SWGfL](#)
- [Children with SEND | TALK Checklist by Internet Watch Foundation](#)
- [Online bullying and SEN/disability - Anti-Bullying Alliance](#)

Childnet:

- [Thrive Online](#)
- [STAR SEND Toolkit](#)
- [Be Safe and Smart Online](#)
- [My Life Online - Conversation Guide](#)
- [Connect with respect \(SEND\)](#)
- [Supporting young people with SEND](#)



NCA-CEOP Education:

- [Jessie & Friends BSL-interpreted videos](#)
- [Jessie & Friends subtitled videos](#)
- [Play Like Share Subtitled](#)
- [Know your friends with Josh and Sue](#)
- [Connect](#)



Internet Matters:

- [Neurodivergent children safety online](#)
- [Inclusive Digital Safety Advice Hub](#)
- [Advice for professionals - Inclusive Digital Safety](#)



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About LESAS

The [LADO Education Safeguarding Advisory Service](#) (LESAS) role is to continue and build upon the statutory LADO function for the whole of the children's workforce and support education settings (early years settings, childminders, schools, and colleges) in Kent who work with children aged 0-18 to meet their safeguarding responsibilities and respond to safeguarding concerns.

Our team is made up of experienced social work and education professionals who have a thorough understanding of key local and national legislation and statutory guidance related to safeguarding and education safeguarding practice.

Staying true to our core social work values, our ethos means we will not compromise on children's safety - placing the welfare of the child centrally in all of our thinking.

Find out more about LESAS and our support and services available at:

[Child protection and safeguarding - KELSI](#)
[Safeguarding Children](#)

Disclaimer

The Kent County Council [LADO Education Safeguarding Advisory Service](#) makes every effort to ensure that the information in our templates is accurate and up to date, however, ultimate responsibility for ensuring their individual policies are appropriate remains the responsibility of the setting leadership/management team. If errors are brought to our attention, we will correct them as soon as practicable.

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