



January 2024



## Safeguarding and Online Safety snippet

Happy new Year to you all and I hope you had a wonderful Christmas with friends and Family members. As ever, I try to bring you the key stories that have made it my way this week and share some useful tips or ideas on how to support our young people.

### TECHNOLOGY

#### Action needed to protect children from abusive AI chatbots

An investigation has revealed that AI chatbots on the popular Character.AI forum have been designed to dispense abusive, sexist, homophobic, and racist advice to children as young as 13. The regulators have failed to predict this threat to children's online safety, and the Online Safety Bill lacks enforceable laws to hold platforms responsible for illegal content. Ian Russell, father of Molly Russell who took her own life after being bombarded by similar provocations, criticised the lack of safety measures in AI-driven technology for young people. The concept of "legal but harmful" online content promoting eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide is nonsensical and barbaric. Children are protected from making harmful decisions in real life, yet they are allowed to be goaded into self-harm by AI chatbots. Urgent action is required to prevent further tragedies and protect children from online abuse.

*Daily Telegraph*

#### Elba launches intense campaign to tackle youth knife crime

Idris Elba is launching an intense three-month campaign to tackle the youth knife crime epidemic in the UK. The campaign, called Knives Down, will be launched outside Parliament and aims to demand action from the Government. Elba will be joined by grieving relatives of victims, as well as London Mayor Sadiq Khan. The campaign will focus on putting pressure on the Government to act and will also urge tech giants to introduce safety measures to stop advertising knives online. The campaign's aims include banning the use and sale of machetes and zombie knives, restoring the Serious Violence Task Force, and boosting funding for projects that tackle the causes of knife crime.

*Sunday Express*

#### NSPCC - Online Safety Youth Taskforce

The NSPCC is setting up a new Online Safety Youth Taskforce, a group of 15 young people (13-16) to share their views and issues that young people face online and advise the NSPCC on what matters most to them. They'll get to meet decision-makers, attend events and workshops, receive training and more.

This sounds like a wonderful opportunity, but you'll need to be quick. Application forms need to be submitted by 12 Jan 2024. Full details can be found <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/online-safety-youth-taskforce/>

## HEALTH

### Alarming increase in children's mental health problems

Go Beyond, a charity that provides breaks for children, has reported an "alarming" increase in mental health problems among youngsters since the pandemic. Data show the percentage of young people referred for loneliness and isolation to Go Beyond children's breaks in Derbyshire and Cornwall rose from 2.5% during 2009-2021 to 14.9% in 2022 and 13% in 2023. Those referred for stress increased from 2% during 2009-2021 to 13.8% in 2022 and 14.8% last year. Carl Wholey, Go Beyond's director for children, said: "The impact on children of this has been massive. The idea of being isolated was normalised and many children have found it hard to make the shift to getting back out there."

*The Sunday Telegraph*

### Doctors call for urgent action to tackle youth vaping

A group of 17 practising and retired paediatric specialists have written to the Times to urge the Government to take action to address the rise in vaping-related disorders reported among children and young people, and the rise in vaping rates among young people that has accompanied the widespread availability of disposable vapes. The letter calls for three urgent steps to be taken: "First, rigorous enforcement of the ban on vapes and snus sales to children and young people under 18, with punitive measures for non-compliance; second, ban the sale of snus and vapes to adults except when prescribed for smoking cessation, as, in our experience, wider availability enables them to fall into children's hands; and third, introduce a total ban on disposable vapes."

*The Times*

## Don't Share Personal Information Online

Ofcom have released their latest top trends from people's online lives and, as always, it makes for an interesting read. There were two standout trends:

1. Nearly three quarters of teens said they had encountered one or more potential harms in the previous four weeks. The top 3 were:
  - Animal cruelty.
  - Promotion of suicide.
  - Promotion of self-harm.
2. Around 20% of children (8-17) with a social media profile use a false age over 18. This ties in with the numbers in Primary schools (KS2) when the children are asked why they're using a false age it's usually one of 3 reasons:
  - They just use the first age (year of birth) shown when signing up - this is all about the speed of getting into the app.
  - They are fully aware that if they give their true age, they won't be allowed access.
  - Because they've been taught in school, "Don't share personal information online." Be very careful with this message as it can be very confusing for younger children. 'Don't share personal information online' is impossible, it is the context that matters. In other words, "When is it appropriate to share personal information online and what is appropriate to share?"

You can see more top trends [HERE](#) and you can download the full report [HERE](#)

# What Children & Young People Need to Know about Free Speech vs Hate Speech



Contentious or provocative viewpoints are shared every second of the day online 🤖 📱 That's not to say, however, that an opinion is less valid simply because it's initially unpopular: just think about Galileo or Emmeline Pankhurst. The facility to have our beliefs questioned – and to challenge other peoples in return – is often a catalyst for scientific and social progress.

With disturbing frequency, though, some individuals post damaging hate speech online under the guise of 'freedom of expression' – and unless young people can identify hate speech, there's a risk of them being influenced by such harmful content. Our [#WakeUpWednesday](#) guide explores the crucial differences between free speech and hate speech. Please [click here](#) to view the guide in full for further information about this topic.