See the Signs

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What UK schools are seeing and doing about student mental health in the digital age

Includes survey findings from over
400 UK schools, colleges and MATs.
Plus practical ideas and solutions.

Qoria

Contents

Foreword

Schools across the UK face an urgent challenge: safeguarding students in a digital environment that evolves faster than policy or practice can keep pace.

Online risks are now a daily reality, with serious implications for mental health and wellbeing.

Statutory guidance makes clear that effective filtering and monitoring are essential. In England, this is set out in the Department for Education's *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, alongside its *Filtering and Monitoring Standards for Schools and Colleges*.

In Wales, the *Keeping Learners Safe* framework and the digital standards published on Hwb provide similar expectations and practical support, including guidance on web filtering and device considerations.

These standards exist for a reason.

When systems fail, the consequences can be devastating. We have worked with bereaved families, including those of Frankie Thomas, whose tragic death reminds us that gaps in digital safeguarding can be catastrophic.

Filtering and monitoring are about safeguarding. They enable schools to detect harm early and intervene before risks escalate.

But technology alone is not enough.

It must be implemented thoughtfully, aligned with clear policies, and supported by staff training and parental engagement. In the face of increasingly complex platforms and emerging risks such as AI, schools need confidence that their systems meet recognised standards and provide the visibility required to keep children safe.

David Wright CBE
Director
UK Safer Internet Centre

About the Survey

In July 2025, we asked our school customers across the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand to share what they were seeing and how they were responding to the growing challenges of student mental health and digital wellbeing.

Our goal was twofold:

1. To understand these challenges in detail, so we can provide targeted, meaningful support.

2. To foster a sense of shared experience, so that schools can support each other and no school feels isolated in facing these issues.

> We received responses from **almost 1,000 schools across the UK (422), the US, Australia, and New Zealand — the largest response ever for a report of this kind.**

UK participants included Headteachers, DSLs, network managers, MAT leaders, Trust leaders, and classroom teachers.

What we heard was clear: Schools are navigating a digital environment that is changing faster than they can keep up. Online risks are evolving daily. And by the time a pattern of harm becomes apparent to schools, students may already have been negatively affected. This makes the ability to notice signs of risk at the earliest opportunity more critical than ever.

They also shared that:

- Digital wellbeing concerns are now a weekly or daily reality in many schools.

- Mental health impacts are widespread and severe, affecting focus, attendance, and emotional regulation.

- Students are increasingly turning to new technologies like AI chatbots for emotional support — sometimes in risky or concerning ways.

- Parent engagement remains one of the most significant barriers to progress.

- For many, the speed of online trends is outpacing the school system's ability to respond.

These findings matter not just because they affect individual children, but because they connect directly to schools' safeguarding and compliance responsibilities, including those outlined in KCSIE.

This paper is designed to help schools not only understand the issues but also act more quickly, effectively, and confidently in partnership with students, parents, and staff.

This is an epidemic. That's a deliberately chosen word. It is not an exaggeration. Our children's mental wellbeing is being increasingly affected by online risks and actions."

UK Secondary Headteacher

Section One

What UK Education Providers Told Us

1.1 Key findings at a glance

- 94% of respondents say they are at least moderately concerned about online mental health impacts, with 68% reporting being "very or extremely" concerned.

- Weekly or daily incidents of digital harm were reported by 68% of respondents.

- Online bullying/harassment and social media obsession are each seen in nearly 8 in 10 respondents.

- TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp dominate the platforms of concern, followed by YouTube.

- AI-related risks are rising fast, with 77% of respondents concerned about students' exposure to unregulated or misleading content.

These figures reflect a clear and growing reality — one that education providers already know: that student digital wellbeing is now a daily safeguarding concern — not a future risk or fringe issue.

Education providers are experiencing its impact regularly. For many, this is no longer about raising awareness — it's about ensuring systems, culture, and confidence are in place to act.

The most common issues, like online bullying and constant social comparison, aren't separate from the school experience — they influence relationships, concentration, and students' sense of identity. If left unchecked, they shape school culture in ways that normalise harm and silence help-seeking.

Meanwhile, the platforms causing the most concern are those most ingrained in students' everyday lives. While there is global regulatory pressure to ban them outright, we must remember that bans do not always address the root of the problem. What schools need is a clear understanding of how these apps work, why students use them, and where the risks lie — so they see the signs and guide young people with credibility and impact.

Increasingly, students are turning to AI for answers, advice, or even emotional support. While these technologies can appear helpful, the line between support and harm is often blurred.

Unlike regulated education tools, consumer-facing AI platforms are not designed with child safety in mind. Without safeguards, they can:

- Provide unverified or inaccurate advice, which may be taken at face value by younger users,

- Reinforce stereotypes, misinformation and biases built into their training data, and

- Generate or expose students to harmful or dangerous content, including sexualised or violent material.

UK education providers share these concerns.

Those responding to our survey reported that the two most pressing issues identified were students being exposed to unregulated or misleading content and confiding in AI chatbots rather than trusted adults. Both trends highlight the risk of young people replacing trusted adult guidance with automated tools that lack accountability or context.

For education providers, the implication is clear: education and vigilance remain essential. Even as legislation reshapes access to social media platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram across the globe, AI literacy and digital resilience must form part of the curriculum. Students need to understand how these systems work, where their limitations lie, and how to seek safe, credible sources of support when they feel vulnerable.

3 key actions schools, colleges, and MATs can take now:

1. Address AI use directly through student education, staff guidance and technological interventions

2. Tailor family engagement to overcome barriers and meet parents where they are.

3. Strengthen early detection systems by combining staff insight with intelligent tools

Under KCSIE, schools have a statutory duty to address both offline and online risks. With incidents happening at least weekly in most schools, proactive strategies and the ability to identify issues early are no longer optional — they are essential.

1.2 The challenge for UK education providers

Our UK survey findings highlight a growing reality: safeguarding now depends on the ability to see what is often hidden in students' digital lives.

The risks themselves are well known, but the earliest signs — inappropriate conversations online, harmful content shared, changes in mood, sleep, focus, or social connection — can be subtle and easy to miss.

What matters most is visibility.

When schools can recognise patterns of behaviour as they form, rather than after they escalate, they are far better placed to respond early, protect wellbeing, and maintain the trust of their communities.

Scale of concern

94% of UK respondents reported being at least moderately concerned about the mental health impacts of online behaviour. The top reported impacts include anxiety (90%), negative self-image (86%), and sleep loss (84%), with significant consequences for concentration (80%) and academic focus (69%).

Behavioural trends driving risk

Schools also identified specific behaviours causing concern:

- Online bullying and harassment
- Obsession with social media
- Harmful/toxic opinions or views
- Preoccupation with unrealistic standards set by influencers
- Addiction to gaming
- Unhealthy attachments to AI chatbots

These issues rarely appear in isolation. A child who seems tired or disengaged may also be struggling with social media pressure or online exclusion. Yet these early signs often present subtly — masked as normal adolescent behaviour or missed entirely in busy school or college environments. The challenge for education providers is not just recognising harm, but recognising and seeing the signs early. That requires new visibility, new conversations, and tools that help staff detect what may otherwise go unseen.

> We see students who are too tired to function because of late-night scrolling, or who are in distress over something they've seen online. It's constant."

UK Digital Strategy Lead

> Some of the safeguarding alerts are more serious than they used to be based on the search terms that have been entered."

DSL, UK

Key platform risks

TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp emerged as the top three key platforms of concern for UK schools, followed closely by YouTube.

What should education providers be watching for in the way these platforms operate?

TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube share commonalities in persuasive design features that maximise engagement and can heighten mental health and wellbeing risks:

1. **Infinite scroll** — removing natural stopping cues.

2. **Algorithmic recommendations** — creating echo chambers and exposure to extreme content.

3. **Ephemeral content** — creating urgency to check content frequently (FOMO).

4. **Social validation loops** — likes, views, and reactions shaping self-esteem.

5. **Push notifications** — engineered to draw users back in.

6. **Influencer amplification** — promoting narrow ideals and social comparison.

7. **Private messaging** — connecting young people with known and unknown contacts, enabling private conversations that can go undetected.

WhatsApp presents a different but equally serious set of challenges. Its private group messaging, end-to-end encryption, and perceived sense of privacy can enable harmful content, cyberbullying, or exclusionary behaviour to spread quickly and unseen.

This can lead to online disinhibition, where students say or share things in closed groups they would never do face-to-face, intensifying both the severity and the impact of incidents.

Emerging AI risks

Over half of respondents (55%) are also concerned about students confiding in AI chatbots instead of trusted adults. This raises three key concerns:

- Exposure to unsafe or misleading advice.

- Risky role-play scenarios that normalise harmful behaviour.

- Gradual replacement of human help-seeking habits.

AI companions are already reshaping how some students manage stress, relationships, and challenges. AI systems can appear supportive but may offer advice that is inaccurate, unverified, or even dangerous when taken out of context. Role-play functions, particularly in unmoderated AI platforms, can blur the lines between safe exploration and the normalisation of harmful behaviour.

Over time, relying on AI "companions" instead of speaking to real people can also reduce students' willingness to seek help from teachers, DSLs, or parents — cutting schools off from early warning signs.

What makes AI-related risks challenging is how quietly they can emerge. Students may not openly share that they're turning to AI for support. But there are signs if we know where to look. A shift in mood or language, withdrawal from peers, or changes in classroom focus can be early cues. Alongside staff awareness, technology can also play a critical role, helping schools identify when a child may be engaging with a chatbot and providing the visibility needed to connect these patterns before they escalate.

On their own, these signs can appear insignificant — a tired student, a distracted moment, a change in tone. But when viewed together, they form a pattern that tells a different story. The shift we need is not more workload, but sharper visibility: the ability to connect the dots early and respond with confidence.

Frequency of digital harm incidents

Two-thirds of respondents said they experience incidents of digital harm that impact student mental health at least weekly (44% weekly, 24% daily). This frequency highlights the importance and potential of moving from purely reactive responses to a more proactive, preventative approach.

By spotting patterns and addressing concerns earlier, schools can reduce the pressure on staff, respond with greater confidence, and create more space for positive, wellbeing-focused work.

This is the driving principle behind our See the Signs framework, explored later in this paper: equipping schools with the insight, tools, and confidence to intervene early and help every student stay safe, supported, and able to thrive.

> We had a student who turned to an AI bot daily for advice instead of speaking to staff or parents. The advice wasn't harmful in itself, but it was completely unmonitored, and the trust in real adults was eroding."

DSL, UK

1.3 Data deep dive

Level of concern about online mental health impacts

Response options	UK %
Extremely concerned	**21%**
Very concerned	**47%**
Moderately concerned	**27%**
Slightly concerned	**6%**
Not at all concerned	**0%**

Values are rounded to the nearest integer.

What this means for education providers

With 94% of respondents reporting moderate to extreme concern, education providers no longer view the mental health impacts of online behaviour as rare. They recognise them as part of everyday safeguarding. Schools are already seeing the signs: anxiety, disrupted sleep, negative self-image, and the resulting effects on focus, attendance, and learning. The challenge now is to move from recognising these issues to acting earlier, using prevention and early identification to reduce their long-term impact on student wellbeing.

It's not just the big incidents. It's the drip, drip of small daily interactions that wear down resilience."

DSL, UK secondary

Key areas of behavioural concern

Response options	UK %
Online bullying/harassment	**79%**
Obsession with social media	**79%**
Harmful/toxic opinions and views	**61%**
Addiction to gaming	**60%**
Preoccupation with unrealistic standards set by influencers	**51%**
Unhealthy attachments to AI chatbots	**29%**

Values are rounded to the nearest integer.

What stands out is the interconnected nature of these behaviours. A student struggling with gaming overuse may also experience disrupted sleep, reduced academic focus, and greater vulnerability to toxic online content. Similarly, social media obsession can fuel bullying, amplify unrealistic standards, and increase reliance on AI tools for validation or companionship.

For UK education providers, this means moving beyond siloed responses. Whole-school strategies that integrate digital literacy, wellbeing education, and safeguarding are essential. Approaches that build resilience, empathy, and critical thinking give students the tools to navigate multiple challenges at once. At the same time, supporting staff with up-to-date training and partnering with parents ensures consistent messages across school and home.

The findings point to a crucial opportunity: UK schools are not only identifying these risks — they are well placed to lead a shift towards positive digital cultures. By recognising overlaps, schools can design strategies that don't just reduce harm but actively empower students to thrive in their digital lives.

What this means for education providers

The data shows that online bullying and social media obsession (both 79%) remain the most pressing digital wellbeing concerns, but they are far from the only ones.

Schools are also reporting significant issues with harmful or toxic views (61%), gaming overuse (60%), and the pressure of unrealistic online standards (51%). Added to this is a newer concern: almost a third of schools (29%) highlighted unhealthy attachments to AI chatbots, signalling the rise of artificial intelligence as a factor in student wellbeing.

The social media obsession is relentless, but what really worries me is the normalisation of toxic opinions."

Headteacher, UK

Platforms of most concern

Platform	UK %
TikTok	**90%**
Snapchat	**80%**
WhatsApp	**54%**
YouTube	**49%**
Instagram	**46%**

Values are rounded to the nearest integer.

What this means for education providers

As shared previously, data shows that TikTok (90%) and Snapchat (80%) are the platforms of greatest concern for UK education providers, followed by WhatsApp (54%), YouTube (49%), and Instagram (46%). While each platform offers opportunities for creativity and connection, their design features often prioritise engagement over wellbeing.

For students, TikTok's algorithm can rapidly serve up extreme or age-inappropriate content, while Snapchat's disappearing messages make harmful interactions harder to trace. WhatsApp and similar encrypted messaging platforms can create closed environments where bullying, exclusion, or misinformation may spread unnoticed. Meanwhile, YouTube and Instagram remain central to students' social and cultural lives but frequently expose them to unrealistic standards or polarising views.

For education providers, the key takeaway is that platform risks are not all the same. Safeguarding strategies must reflect these differences — pairing clear monitoring and reporting systems with education that helps students critically understand the platforms they use most.

This means going beyond warnings about screen time to focus on practical digital literacy skills: recognising algorithmic influence, questioning online "trends," and managing group dynamics in private chats.

By tailoring education and conversation to platform-specific realities, schools can give young people the confidence to enjoy the positive aspects of digital life while reducing exposure to harm. When staff, parents, and students share a common understanding of how these platforms work, it strengthens the whole-school approach to online safety.

> Children as young as 8 are having access to these platforms, and they are too young to be able to understand how to use them properly."
>
> **Headteacher, UK**
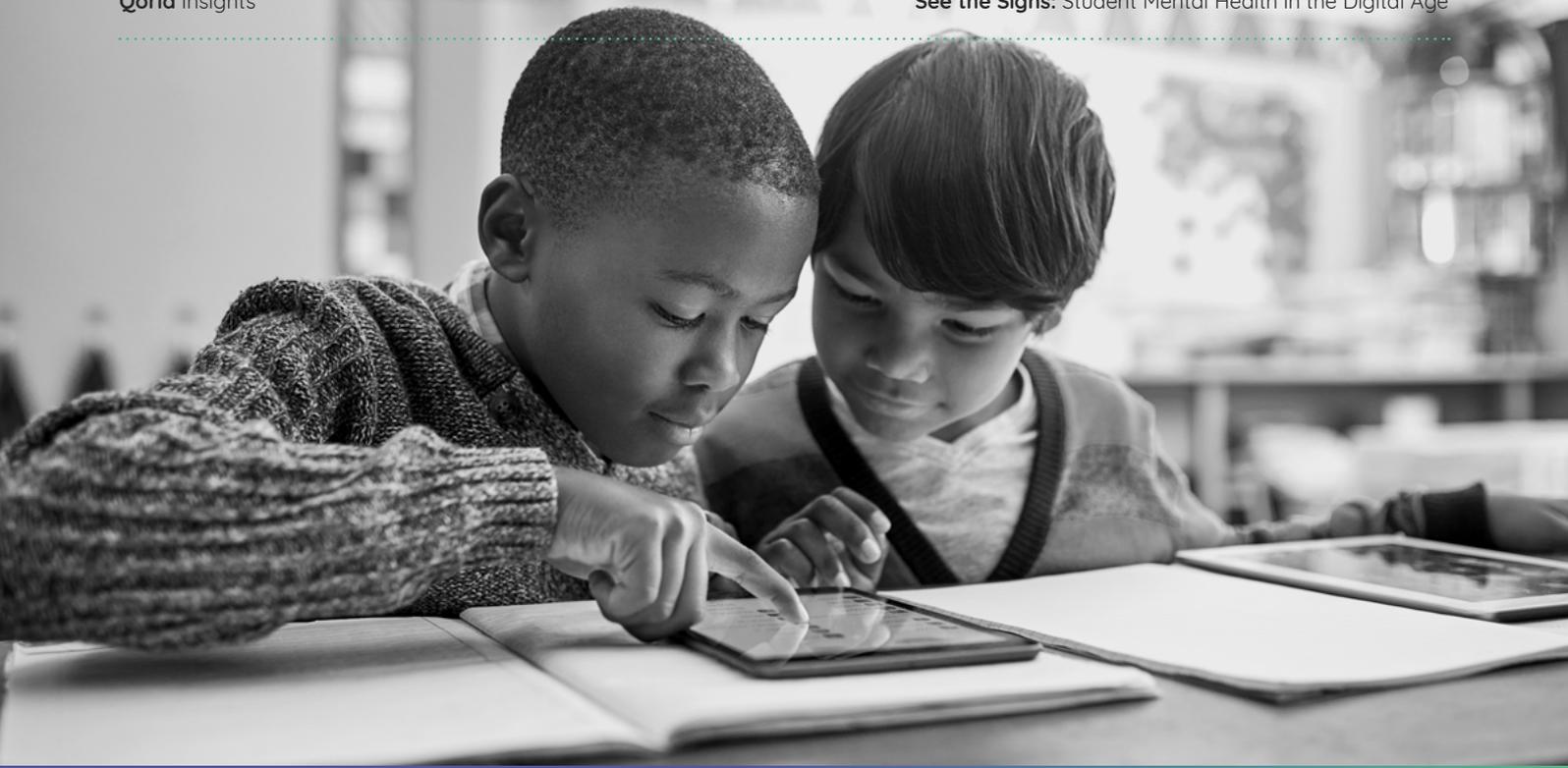
AI and student behaviour

Behaviours of concern	UK %
Exposure to unregulated or misleading content	**77%**
Students confiding in AI instead of trusted adults	**55%**
Students using AI for role-play or risky conversations	**48%**
Students developing emotional attachments to AI	**37%**

Values are rounded to the nearest integer.

What this means for education providers

The data shows that over half of respondents (55%) are concerned about students confiding in AI instead of trusted adults, with further risks including risky role-play scenarios (48%), exposure to unsafe or misleading advice (77%), and emotional attachments to AI (37%). Together, these figures highlight a growing reliance on artificial intelligence as a source of support — one that may appear neutral or helpful, but carries significant risks.

Unlike teachers, counsellors, or peers, AI tools cannot genuinely provide context, empathy, or accountability. They may deliver misinformation as fact, enable inappropriate or sexualised conversations, or encourage unhealthy emotional attachment. Most importantly, they risk displacing human help-seeking at moments when professional or family support is essential.

For education providers, this is not only a safeguarding issue but also a teachable moment. Students need age-appropriate guidance on what AI can and cannot do, alongside reassurance that real people remain the safest and most reliable sources of care. Schools, colleges and MATs can respond by:

- Normalising conversations about AI in classrooms and wellbeing settings, so students understand both its potential and its limits.

- Embedding AI literacy into digital citizenship education, helping students spot unsafe advice or manipulative interactions.

- Strengthening human connection by ensuring that students always know where, how, and with whom they can share concerns.

- Engaging parents and carers, many of whom may be unfamiliar with chatbot tools like Character.ai or Replika, so they can continue the conversation at home.

By combining clear education with strong support networks, UK schools can ensure that AI is seen as a tool for learning and creativity — not a substitute for the trusted relationships every young person needs to thrive.

Frequency of online safety incidents

Frequency	UK %
Daily	**24%**
Weekly	**44%**
Monthly	**16%**
Rarely	**7%**
Never	**0%**
Unsure	**9%**

Values are rounded to the nearest integer.

What this means for education providers

The findings show that over two-thirds (68%) of respondents experience online safety incidents at least weekly, with nearly a quarter (24%) facing them daily. Only a small minority reported "rarely" or "unsure," confirming that digital harms are not occasional disruptions but a routine part of school life.

This level of frequency underlines two key realities. First, online challenges — from cyberbullying to inappropriate content sharing — are now embedded in the daily rhythm of student life. Second, schools are already on the frontline, managing issues that spill across learning, behaviour, and wellbeing.

Yet within this challenge lies an opportunity. Regular exposure means schools are well placed to:

- Spot patterns early, preventing isolated incidents from escalating into long-term harm.

- Normalise student reporting, making conversations about digital issues as routine as discussions about attendance or behaviour.

- Direct resources strategically, focusing support where risks are most consistent or severe.

By investing in monitoring, staff training, and clear intervention processes, schools can move from reactive crisis management to proactive prevention. This not only reduces harm but also frees up capacity for positive, forward-looking work that builds resilience, digital literacy, and wellbeing across the school community.

> Pupil mental resilience across all genders and primary age groups appear to be lower. Health impacts too, with more pupils presenting with poor eating habits and less fitness capabilities. Pupils that we know are spending a lot of home time online are struggling to focus and progress in school."
>
> **DSL, UK school**

> We have incidents every week without fail — sometimes every day. You can't plan for it, but you have to be ready."
>
> **IT Manager, UK**

What education providers believe would most improve their ability to support students' digital wellbeing

When asked what would make the biggest difference, respondents were clear: support starts with parents.

Improved student awareness was the second priority, with many schools pointing to the value of peer-led campaigns that make the risks relatable, and the ability to equip students with the skills, knowledge and ability to act when they see something that isn't right.

Staff training was also highly rated, showing that schools want to build capability without overloading already stretched teams.

Practicality mattered too. Six in ten schools (60%) called for real-world examples students can connect with, while nearly half highlighted the need for time-saving tools and workflows to make early intervention manageable.

Access to enhanced monitoring and wellbeing tools (33%) and stronger multi-agency support (38%) were also seen as part of the solution.

Taken together, the message is clear: schools don't just want more awareness of digital harms, they want help turning awareness into action.

1.4 Global comparison — UK vs. Australia, NZ, and the US

Global comparison

Key area of concern	UK %	Aus %	NZ %	US %
Very or extremely concerned about mental health impacts	68%	78%	66%	63%
Bullying/harassment	79%	83%	67%	72%
Social media obsession	79%	76%	63%	83%
Students confiding in AI	55%	50%	49%	60%
Incidents at least weekly	68%	46%	42%	47%

Values are rounded to the nearest integer.

What this means for UK education providers

The data paints a picture of high and rising digital wellbeing pressures. Over half of UK respondents report being at least very concerned about mental health impacts linked to online behaviour, and worry about online bullying and harassment (79%) and social media obsession (79%) is among the highest globally.

The UK also records the highest proportion of at least weekly incidents (68%) compared to other regions. This level of frequency points to an urgent need for early intervention systems that can identify risks before they escalate, as well as stronger staff training to ensure teachers feel confident addressing issues in real time.

Notably, more than half of UK respondents (55%) are concerned about students confiding in AI chatbots instead of trusted adults — a reminder that as social media evolves, new technologies are already reshaping how young people seek advice and support. Embedding AI literacy within wellbeing education will be essential to prevent misinformation or unhealthy dependencies.

What is undeniable, however, is that these challenges are shared across borders. Schools in Australia, New Zealand, and the US are facing similar issues, albeit with different emphases. For UK leaders, this reinforces the importance of collaboration and knowledge exchange across the sector and internationally, so that schools are not working in isolation but drawing on collective strategies to keep pace with change.

"Children are losing the ability to think pragmatically, and have a level of expectation where what they see online is the same as in the real world."

School Principal

Section Two
Strategies and Solutions

The sooner risks are identified, the greater the opportunity to prevent harm and build a stronger digital culture. Yet in many schools, the earliest signs of distress are subtle and easily missed.

"See the Signs" is Qoria's call to action: to give educators, parents, and school leaders the tools, insight, and confidence to detect risk early — before support becomes a crisis response.

This is also a chance to think creatively. Whether it's reimagining how parents engage with digital safety themes at school or college, amplifying student-led initiatives, or getting more value from existing tools, the solutions don't have to be complex to be effective.

The framework opposite outlines five practical, high-impact areas where schools can adapt, innovate, and strengthen their approach, directly addressing the needs identified in the survey while building capacity for long-term change.

Framework for change

1. Better engage parents and students

2. Peer-led student awareness campaigns

3. Building staff capability without overloading

4. Technology as an enabler and time-saver

5. Addressing AI risks proactively

2.1 Creative, high-impact parental engagement

Parents play a crucial role in shaping students' digital habits, but busy schedules and competing priorities mean many may struggle to engage with traditional school communications. By making engagement interactive, relevant, and easy to fit into family life, schools can help parents not only hear the message but actively practice and reinforce it at home.

How schools can help parents "See the Signs"

A

Reverse Mentoring Evenings:

A window into children's digital worlds

Invite students to become the experts — hosting short sessions where they show parents the apps, games, and platforms they use. This includes walking through privacy settings, trending features, and how to spot red flags. It builds mutual respect and gives adults a rare window into their child's digital world.

B

Family Scenario Sheets:

Dinner table dilemmas — turning tough topics into conversations

Distribute monthly one-page printouts or digital handouts featuring realistic, xxpriate digital dilemmas (e.g. receiving a nude, peer pressure or upstanding in group chats). Include guiding questions like behaviours that would make them feel proud of themselves, with space for families to write or discuss their responses. This encourages healthy conversation and strengths-based, shared decision-making.

C

Parent–Student Challenges:

Micro-moments that matter

Use simple challenges like "no devices at dinner for a week" or "talk to your child every night for 1 week about their favourite apps (App Chats)" to prompt low-pressure, daily dialogue. Small shifts like these help normalise conversations about online life.

D

Phone-Light Learning Days:

The power of pause

Encourage a school-wide screen-light or screen-free day, then ask students to reflect on the experience at home. Provide parents with a brief conversation guide to explore how their child felt, what they noticed, and what they missed (or didn't).

E

Use Existing Events as Everyday Anchors:

Integrate for ease

Incorporate 2–3 minute digital wellbeing insights into school events where parents are already present — such as sports days, parent-teacher interviews, or newsletters. Keep it practical and aligned to what's happening now in students' digital lives. This helps create digital integration into multiple facets of school and home life.

F

Digital Time Capsule:

A year in screens

Have students and parents capture a snapshot of their current online habits — favourite apps, screen time, online friends, and worries. Revisit the capsule 6 months or a year later to discuss what's changed, what's improved, and what new risks have emerged.

G

Spot the Signs Family Game Night:

Signs, signals and safety

Create and distribute a simple quiz or printable card game where families match digital behaviours to warning signs (e.g. secrecy, changes in mood, unusual gifts). This playful format helps build awareness without fear or judgement.

H

Digital Wellbeing Bingo:

Keeping learning fun

Provide families with a fortnightly or monthly "bingo card" of small, positive online habits — such as "learn how to check app privacy settings", "talk about one good and one bad thing that happened online this week", or "spend an hour of power offline together". It's light-hearted, but impactful.

Scenario example

A secondary school ran "Screen-Free Sunday" challenges with family activity photo submissions. Over 60% of families took part, with reported improvements in sleep and family interaction.

Another quick win for schools

Share micro-webinars (live or pre-recorded) — 15-minute sessions with practical tips, offered live and pre-recorded.

2.2 Peer-led student awareness campaigns

Students often respond more positively to messages that come from their peers. A peer-led approach can make digital safety and wellbeing education more relatable, reduce resistance, and build a culture where safe, respectful online behaviour is the norm.

Peer advocates can also act as early "sensors" — spotting emerging trends or issues before staff are aware, allowing schools to intervene sooner.

Creative peer-to-peer initiatives

When students lead the conversation, change often follows. These peer-led initiatives support authentic engagement, strengthen student voice, and promote positive digital cultures across year groups.

A

Student Digital Wellbeing Ambassadors

Train a select group of students to act as champions for online safety and wellbeing. Ambassadors can:

- Lead assemblies and classroom discussions.

- Mentor younger students.

- Co-design posters, newsletters, or awareness campaigns.

- Introduce in-person initiatives such as Talk Tokens: an easy, preformatted conversation starter or prompt for students designed to break down social barriers and start meaningful conversations between students across the school.

- Act as go-to peers for digital concerns, in partnership with staff.

B

Themed Awareness Weeks

Align with global movements like Safer Internet Day or Anti-Bullying Week, or establish your own "See the Signs" Week led by the student council or wellbeing teams. Focus on current and relevant challenges — like AI companions or screen time struggles — with themed activities and daily spotlights.

C

Student-Produced School Content

Let students take the lead on creative outputs that speak their language. Short videos, reels, infographics, or podcasts made by students, for students often have more credibility and cut-through than adult-led messages.

D

Specific Inter-Year Mentoring

Older students can play a powerful role in guiding younger ones. Establish structured mentoring sessions where older pupils share their own learning and offer advice on:

- Navigating social media safely.
- Managing time online.
- Dealing with peer pressure and misinformation.

E

Digital Detective Challenges

In these team-based activities, students analyse fictional scenarios (e.g. a group chat gone wrong or a suspicious new "friend" online), look for clues and present their risk assessments and solutions to staff or peers during classroom or pastoral care lessons. It's a fun, active way to build digital critical thinking through teamwork.

F

Wellbeing Wall or Feed

Give students ownership of a physical or digital space, like a bulletin board or Teams/Google Classroom feed, where they can share:

- Positive online stories — celebrating examples of young people using technology or useful strategies to safeguard, connect, create, or contribute to their community.
- Helpful tips or app reviews — giving students the chance to share what they've discovered about staying safe, managing screen time, or using apps for learning and wellbeing.
- Quotes, shout-outs, and kindness campaigns — reinforcing peer-to-peer encouragement and highlighting the values of respect and empathy.

G

Peer-Led "Myth vs. Fact" Campaigns

Students research and debunk common digital myths, such as "Snapchat messages can't be saved" or "Only unknown strangers are risky online." Their findings can be shared through posters, presentations, or social media takeovers.

H

Challenge Chain Events

Create a fun, school-wide challenge where one year group sets a digital wellbeing task — like "no devices after 8 pm" — and challenges another year to top their participation rate. This builds positive peer pressure and healthy habits.

I

Student-Led Parent Briefings

Flip the dynamic and invite trained ambassadors to host short briefings or Q&A sessions for parents. Cover topics like trending platforms, online slang, or where students think adults should pay more attention. It fosters mutual respect and opens up the conversation at home.

Scenario example

A secondary school created a Year 10 "Digital Leaders" group who ran a "Don't Scroll Past" campaign on how to report harmful content. The campaign had multiple touchpoints and visible reminders shared on posters throughout the school, as well as weekly reminders in school assemblies.

Reports to the pastoral care team rose by 40% in the following term, with several incidents addressed before escalation.

Another quick win for schools

Ask form groups to create a one-minute "top tip" video for staying safe with AI, or social media like TikTok or Snapchat. Share via the school's internal platforms or assemblies.

2.3 Building staff capability without overloading

Supporting digital safety doesn't have to mean adding hours to a teacher's day. These short, high-impact strategies help staff stay informed, engaged, and equipped — without overwhelming already full schedules.

How leaders can help staff "See the Signs" with staff capability initiatives

A

Micro-Learning Modules

Work with experts to deliver regular 10–15 minute online refreshers covering new apps, slang, and emerging risks. Modules can be completed flexibly and repeated across terms. Focus on what staff really need to know — how the platform works, what risks to watch for, and how to start conversations with students.

B

App of the Month Briefings

Incorporate a 5-minute update into regular staff meetings. The DSL, IT lead or digital wellbeing ambassador highlights one trending platform — outlining its purpose, features, risks, and how students are using it. Keep it punchy and practical.

C

Scenario-Based Training

Use anonymised, real incidents from your own (or another school) to guide the discussion. Walking staff through the early warning signs, how it was handled, and what might have helped earlier builds real-world understanding and reinforces the relevance of local policies.

D

Shared Resource Bank

Create a centralised, staff-only hub (on your intranet or drive) containing:

- FAQs on popular apps

- Guidance on managing disclosures

- Reporting procedures

- Quick-reference guides for signs of harm

Keep it updated and easy to navigate — make it the first place staff turn to, not the last.

E

"A Day in The Life" Workshops

Run occasional PD sessions where staff simulate a student's online journey — navigating platforms, seeing algorithmic content, handling peer messages, or facing risky prompts. It's an eye-opening way to build empathy and awareness.

F

Spot the Signs Storyboard

Each term, create a visual flowchart of a real (but anonymised) safeguarding journey around a key digital harm. Allocate responsibility to a different department each term.

Highlight:

- The initial red flags.

- What action was taken.

- The outcome for the student.

Display in staff areas or briefings to reinforce the power of early intervention.

G

5-Minute "Hot Topic" Pods

Record short audio or voice memo briefings on current issues — like deepfake images, AI chatbots, or online challenges — that staff can listen to on the go. Leaders, DSLs, IT leaders or student digital ambassadors can batch-record a term's worth for flexible access.

Scenario example

A primary school adopted quarterly cluster "digital drop-ins" — optional 20-minute briefings over coffee, covering trending platforms and how to respond to related safeguarding concerns. Attendance averaged 65% of staff without mandatory scheduling.

Another quick win for schools

Use PD days to run a "myth-busting" speed session: 10 myths about online safety in 10 minutes.

2.4 Technology as an enabler and time-saver

With incidents occurring weekly or even daily, staff cannot rely on reactive case-by-case responses without becoming overwhelmed.

The right technology — used strategically — can transform safeguarding from firefighting to foresight. It can surface risks earlier, give staff more confidence in their decisions, and reduce the time spent on long, complex interventions by stopping issues before they escalate.

Technology is no longer a "nice to have" in safeguarding; it's an essential partner.

Schools that combine human vigilance with intelligent filtering, monitoring, and classroom tools have a far clearer picture of digital risk than those relying on eyes and ears alone, or filtering alone. And when those tools are up to date and configured for education settings, they can detect the slang, code words, and hidden behaviours that basic systems routinely miss.

> Some of the safeguarding alerts are now more serious than they used to be, based on the search terms that have been entered."
>
> **DSL, UK secondary**

How schools can "See the Signs" with technology

- **Integrate monitoring and wellbeing tools** — Choose solutions that link alerts directly to pastoral workflows so nothing is missed. Human-moderated, real-time monitoring can flag concerning activity — from harmful content searches to risky conversations — within minutes, allowing staff to act swiftly.

- **Custom UK-specific keyword and risk profiles** — Tailor detection to include UK slang, current local trends, and context-based triggers so early warnings are accurate and relevant.

- **Dashboard-driven decision-making** — Use aggregated trend data to guide targeted and thematic interventions, such as assemblies (announcements or safety messaging reinforcement), parent updates, or peer-led campaigns, rather than generic or blanket messaging.

- **Parental control apps** — Provide parents with tools that go beyond screen-time limits to include content filtering, app blocking, and activity reporting at home, enabling consistent protection, alerts and information sharing across school and home environments.

- **Granular, real-time filtering** — Ensure filters can block harmful or illegal content instantly while allowing access to valuable learning resources. The ability to adjust rules for age, context, and curriculum needs is critical.

- **Classroom management tools** — Give teachers the ability to see and guide what students are doing online in real time, adapt internet access to the lesson, and support individuals who need extra help staying on task.

- **Student wellbeing check-ins** — Adopt regular, proactive digital check-in tools that give students a safe way to share how they're feeling, with options for anonymity. AI-powered analysis can highlight concerning patterns early and prompt timely pastoral support.

Scenario example

A secondary school used its digital monitoring platform to detect a sudden spike in harmful language on a gaming platform. Within 48 hours, staff ran a targeted Year 8 session on online bullying and exclusion in online games during the pastoral care period, supported by digital leaders, reducing incidents by 30% in the following fortnight.

Another quick win for schools

Audit your existing tech stack before buying new tools — many schools already have powerful, underused capabilities in their current systems. A simple configuration change or training session can unlock features that save staff hours and improve student safety.

Questions schools can ask themselves when reviewing their tech stack:

- Would we know if a student shared something on their school device that indicates they are in danger, and could we respond within minutes?

- Can our digital monitoring detect coded language, slang, or risky AI role-play scenarios?

- Are our filters able to detect harm in real time, and do they avoid over-blocking valuable resources?

- Do our classroom tools give teachers the flexibility to adapt online access instantly?

- Are we offering parents practical, flexible safeguarding options that fit their child's age and maturity?

The bottom line

Modern safeguarding requires modern tools. When deployed well, technology does more than save time — it increases visibility, sharpens decision-making, and gives schools the confidence to act before harm occurs.

2.5 Addressing AI risks proactively

As previously mentioned, half of UK respondents shared that they are experiencing students confiding in AI chatbots instead of trusted adults.

Without proactive education, these habits can normalise unsafe or isolating behaviour and reduce opportunities for staff to spot early warning signs. AI is here to stay — the challenge is ensuring it supports, rather than replaces, healthy, human-centred help-seeking.

How schools can "See the Signs" with AI

- **AI literacy lessons** — Build into computing or PSHE, English or Technology curricula to teach safe use, limits of AI advice, and bias awareness.

- **Role-play the risks** — Safely simulate risky AI interactions and discuss how to recognise when something doesn't seem right, and how to respond.

- **Clear AI use policy** — Align with KCSIE statutory guidance and legislation recommendations, specifying permitted educational uses and prohibited scenarios.

- **Staff–parent alignment** — Share the same guidance with families so messaging is consistent.

- **"Ask an adult first" pledge** — Students sign a simple agreement that they will check with a trusted adult before acting on AI-generated advice in sensitive situations.

- **Decode the bot workshop** — Students bring anonymised AI responses to class, and together the group fact-checks, identifies bias, and rewrites them with safer, more accurate information.

- **AI companions reality check** — A short, discussion-led session unpacking the limits of "AI friends" and how they differ from human relationships, followed by a "real connection" activity in pairs or groups.

Scenario example

A secondary school introduced a "3 checks" framework: Before acting on AI advice, check with a trusted adult, check a reliable source, and check your instincts. Student surveys showed a 20% increase in those saying they'd approach staff first.

Another quick win for schools

Include an "AI Tip of the Month" update in newsletters, flagging risks and safe uses.

"

AI in particular is quick-moving and difficult. It is not in itself harmful, but what children do with it can be."

UK Teacher

Section Three
See the Signs — Free Resources

School resource companion

At Qoria, we know schools are under immense pressure and that safeguarding can feel overwhelming. That's why we've created a set of simple, ready-to-use resources to help get you started.

These practical supports are designed to make it easier to See the Signs early, open up conversations, and strengthen digital wellbeing, without adding to staff workload. They're not complex systems, but small steps that can make a meaningful difference.

These resources are flexible, classroom-tested, and ideal for staff briefings, parent engagement, pastoral planning, and student-led initiatives. They're structured to work with what schools already have in place — no new systems or training required.

To download these resources, visit **www.qoria.com/see-the-signs**

1. At a glance: Staff slide decks — Top signs and quick wins

What it is

A three-slide briefing resource to use in staff meetings or planning sessions.

Slide 1: Top 5 signs to watch for

Slide 2: Student behaviours to monitor

Slide 3: 3 quick wins for schools: Immediate actions

Why it helps: Schools can raise staff awareness fast, align their team around the signs that matter, and create momentum for proactive action.

2. Parental engagement: Parent-child Q&A guide — Let's Talk Tech

What it is

A conversation guide for schools to share with parents to open up real, non-judgemental conversations at home.

Includes 10 questions designed to explore digital habits, pressure, online identity, AI companions, and family boundaries.

Also includes a film recommendation (*Childhood 2.0*) to co-watch and spark discussion.

Why it helps: Schools can equip families with a simple, no-expertise-needed tool to strengthen digital dialogue and early risk recognition at home.

3. Building staff capability without overloading: Mythbuster cards for staff briefings

What it is

A set of 10 double-sided cards for use in staff rooms, PD sessions, or digital citizenship planning.

Each card presents a common myth and an evidence-based fact that challenges assumptions.

Why it helps: These cards support staff reflection and shared understanding of complex online risks, without requiring formal training or deep tech knowledge.

4. Staff Meeting Scenario Pack

What it is

A printable or digital resource for staff training or wellbeing team planning.

Includes 6 detailed, real-world scenarios covering:

- AI confidants
- Gaming fatigue
- TikTok trends
- Group chat harms
- Hidden struggles in high-achievers
- Early signs of online radicalisation

Each scenario includes: context, digital signals, why it matters, discussion prompts, and key insight.

Why it helps: Offers low-burden, high-impact professional learning that builds confidence and enables earlier interventions.

5. Technology as an enabler & time-saver: 10-Point Tech Audit Checklist

What it is

A reflective tool for IT, wellbeing, and leadership teams.

Covers key questions such as:

- Are systems picking up context, not just content?
- Are alerts routed to those who can act?
- Is student digital behaviour integrated into support planning?

Why it helps: Helps schools understand where their current infrastructure supports early intervention — and where simple changes can make a big difference.

6. Addressing AI risks proactively: "3 Checks for AI" poster

What it is

A bulletin board poster encouraging students to pause and question AI-generated content.

The checks:

1. Check with a human
2. Check the motive
3. Check for context

Why it helps: Builds critical thinking and promotes healthier relationships with AI tools. Ideal for classrooms, digital literacy lessons, or wellbeing walls.

Together, these resources help schools take meaningful steps toward safer, more connected digital environments for students, without creating more work.

7. Continuing the conversation — Spotlight on Student Digital Safety — The Qoria Podcast

Qoria's Spotlight on Student Digital Safety podcast gives school leaders a space to hear directly from peers and experts who understand the pressures they face. It provides timely insights on emerging digital risks, shares practical strategies that have worked in other schools, and offers reassurance that they are not navigating these challenges alone.

For leaders who are short on time, the podcast distils complex issues into actionable takeaways that can inform decision-making, strengthen safeguarding practices, and build staff confidence.

Recent episodes featuring UK guests include:

This One Activity Got 80% of School Staff Engaging in Their Own Wellbeing

From anonymous trolling to AI-powered deepfakes, schools worldwide are confronting a troubling trend: students, and sometimes even parents, using tech to target staff.

At ACS International School Egham, Head of School Mark Wilson recognised early that when digital harm targets staff, early intervention and a culture of help-seeking are essential. Instead of waiting for issues to erupt, he focused on strengthening trust, connection, and everyday wellbeing, laying the groundwork for a staff culture built on psychological safety and mutual support.

Engaging Parents with Quick, Effective Online Resources

Doug Pitts, Deputy Headteacher at Orrell Newfold Community Primary School in the United Kingdom, shares practical strategies for making digital safety a top priority for schools and parents.

The full Spotlight on Student Digital Safety — The Qoria Podcast episode list can be found here.

Episodes are free and available on YouTube and Spotify.

Encourage school leaders, pastoral teams, and IT leads to use these tools and resources as discussion starters in staff meetings or PD sessions.

Final Thoughts — A Shared Mission

Every school leader, DSL, IT director, and pastoral worker in the UK knows the reality: online risks are constant, fast-moving, and often deeply personal for the students in their care. But within that reality is also a truth worth holding onto: schools are already doing extraordinary work.

Across the country, in classrooms, corridors, and staff meetings, you are not just responding to incidents; you are shaping a generation's relationship with technology. Every proactive conversation, every moment you listen without judgement, every time you connect a student with the right support, you are building digital resilience that can last a lifetime.

The challenges can feel relentless, and we know the pace of digital change will not slow down. But with the right systems, education, and partnerships, schools can stay ahead of harm — not just respond to it. The signs are there — sometimes quiet, sometimes disguised — but they always have meaning.

When we help schools see them, we don't just reduce harm — we increase connection, care, and the chance for every student to thrive. When we get it right, the impact is transformative. Students feel safer speaking up, parents

feel better equipped to guide their children and staff feel supported, not isolated, in the safeguarding role they carry.

The shared mission of Smoothwall, and our parent company Qoria, is to stand alongside you in that work, not as an observer but as an active partner. Our belief is simple: no child should fall through the cracks of the digital world. And together, we can work to ensure that doesn't happen.

We are excited to set the standard for what safe, supported, and thriving looks like in 2025 and beyond. And to ensure the online spaces our students inhabit every day are places of positive learning, curiosity, and respect — because they deserve nothing less.

The tools are here. The knowledge is here. Most importantly, the will is here. The rest is what we build together.

Contact Us

If you need any help reviewing your safeguarding technology, want to find out about technologies you are yet to adopt such as digital monitoring, classroom technologies or parental apps, or if you want assistance working with staff, parents or students, Smoothwall can help.

Please email **enquiries@smoothwall.com** in the first instance, tell us what you're interested in and we'll connect you to the right person.

None of us is as powerful as all of us.

Appendix 1
About Smoothwall & Qoria

Smoothwall has been protecting students for over 20 years. We pioneered real-time, content-aware web filtering for UK education back in 2001 and have since expanded into human-moderated digital monitoring, classroom tools, wellbeing tools, and parent engagement platforms.

Our solutions are built in partnership with educators to exceed statutory safeguarding requirements, including Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) and the DfE's Filtering and Monitoring Standards for Schools and Colleges, and are designed to adapt to emerging digital threats.

Qoria is Smoothwall's parent company. Together with our fellow Qoria businesses in the US, Spain, Australia, and New Zealand we are raising the bar in student digital safety.

We are innovating with safeguarding technology, advocating and lobbying for safer policies and practices from governments, big tech, and others, and leaving no stone unturned in our quest to ensure every child is safe and thriving in their digital lives.

Appendix 2
Further Reading for UK Schools

Statutory & Government Guidance

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)
www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2

Working Together to Safeguard Children
www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2

UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) — Education for a Connected World framework:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-a-connected-world

Sector and NGO Resources

UK Safer Internet Centre

A partnership of Childnet, Internet Watch Foundation, and SWGfL, the UK Safer Internet Centre leads national efforts to promote safe and responsible technology use. It coordinates Safer Internet Day, provides expert helplines for schools and professionals, and develops resources that empower children, parents, and educators to build positive digital environments.

NSPCC Online Safety Resources

Part of the UK's leading child protection charity, the NSPCC's online safety hub offers practical guidance for parents, carers, and schools on managing digital risks. Covering topics such as social media, gaming, and online exploitation, the resources aim to help adults have open, informed conversations with children while reinforcing strong safeguarding practices.

Childnet

A charity working directly with children, parents, and teachers, Childnet creates award-winning resources, campaigns, and school workshops to promote safe and empowering internet use. As a core partner of the UK Safer Internet Centre, it plays a central role in Safer Internet Day and develops guidance tailored for educators, families, and youth.

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)

A UK-based charity with global reach, the Internet Watch Foundation works to eliminate online child sexual abuse material (CSAM). It provides a trusted reporting channel, collaborates with industry to remove harmful content, and develops resources to help schools and parents understand the risks of online exploitation and abuse.

Technology & Wellbeing Tools

Smoothwall Online Safety Hub for schools and parents
smoothwall.com/solutions/online-safety-hub

Qustodio for families and schools
qustodio.com

Appendix 3
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Ofcom. Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2024

Netsafe, AI & Online Safety, Emerging Risks & Opportunities, 2025

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Royal College of Psychiatrists. Technology Use & Mental Health of Children & Young People, 2020

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UNESCO. Artificial Intelligence and Education: Guidance for Policy-Makers, 2023

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