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November 2026!



ONLINE SAFETY NEWSLETTER

November 2026

WELCOME TO EDITION FOUR!

Welcome to the fourth edition of the Digital Safety Online Safety Newsletter.

As we move towards the final weeks of the autumn term, November brings a new set of digital safety considerations for schools and families.

With darker evenings, increasing time spent indoors and the Christmas shopping season approaching, children and young people may be spending more time gaming, communicating and exploring online.

For schools, it is also an opportunity to reflect on digital safeguarding arrangements and consider whether staff, systems and procedures are prepared for the weeks ahead.

This month, we're looking at some of the practical issues we believe schools should have on their radar as we approach the festive period.

We explore how changing screen habits can affect children's wellbeing, why AI chatbots are raising new safeguarding questions, and the straightforward cyber security checks schools can make before the Christmas break.

We'll also hear from George about safer gaming, particularly as families begin thinking about new games, devices and consoles for Christmas.



Stuart Younger Cooper, Digital Safety CIC

Alongside this, we'll reflect on our recent School Cyber Safety & Standards Conference and the importance of turning cyber awareness into meaningful action.

This month:

- **Darker evenings, screen time and children's digital wellbeing**
- **AI companions and the safeguarding questions schools should be asking**
- **Is your school cyber ready for the Christmas break?**
- **Safer gaming with George: choosing games and setting up devices**
- **An update from our School Cyber Safety & Standards Conference**

Digital safety doesn't stop at the school gates, and some of the most valuable safeguarding conversations begin with simple questions and a willingness to listen.

We hope this edition provides useful information and practical ideas to take into the final weeks of term.

Stuart, Digital Safety CIC

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November 2026!



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November 2026

DARKER EVENINGS = MORE SCREEN TIME

Helping Children Find a Healthy Digital Balance

As the evenings become darker and colder, children and young people naturally spend more time indoors.

For many, that means more opportunities to play games, watch videos, connect with friends and explore online content.

Technology can be a positive part of this routine. Gaming encourages creativity and teamwork, messaging helps friendships continue outside school, and digital platforms provide opportunities to learn and develop new interests.

But when screen use begins to replace sleep, physical activity or face-to-face interaction, it may be time to review the balance.

It's not simply about how long children spend online, but what they're doing, who they're interacting with and how their experiences are making them feel.

The Difference Between Screen Time and Screen Quality

Not all screen time is equal; an hour spent creating digital artwork, learning a new skill or playing collaboratively with friends can be very different from an hour of endlessly scrolling through short-form videos.

Some platforms are specifically designed to encourage continued engagement through autoplay, notifications and personalised recommendations.

For younger users, recognising when they've had enough can be difficult. This is especially relevant in the evenings, when children may be tired but reluctant to disconnect.

What Should Adults Look Out For?

Changes in behaviour may provide more useful information than the number of hours spent online.

These can include:

- Difficulty switching off devices or ending gaming sessions
- Staying online late into the evening
- Increased tiredness or difficulty concentrating at school
- Becoming upset or anxious after online interactions
- Losing interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Feeling pressure to respond immediately to messages

None of these signs automatically mean that something harmful is happening. However, they may indicate that a conversation about online experiences, friendships or digital routines would be helpful.

The aim shouldn't be to make children feel guilty about enjoying technology. It should be to help them develop habits that support their wellbeing.

Learn about the Screen Time Balance here!

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ONLINE SAFETY NEWSLETTER



November Edition

Small Changes That Support Healthier Online Habits

Helping children develop a healthy relationship with technology doesn't necessarily require strict rules or complicated monitoring systems.

Often, the most effective approach begins with simple conversations and consistent expectations.

Five practical steps worth considering:

1. Make time for conversations
Ask children what they enjoy doing online, which games they're playing and whether anything has made them uncomfortable. Showing genuine interest can make children more willing to discuss problems when they arise.

2. Encourage a bedtime routine
Agree on a reasonable point when gaming, messaging and scrolling should finish. Keeping devices away from bedrooms overnight may also help reduce interruptions from notifications and late-night conversations.

3. Look beyond the screen-time figures
A child spending two hours completing schoolwork or creating something online is having a different experience from one spending the same time viewing distressing content. Consider the quality and impact of online activities, not just their duration.

4. Make offline activities part of the routine Encourage opportunities for exercise, hobbies, social interaction and relaxation away from screens. A healthy balance should include things children enjoy, rather than simply taking away the activities they value.

5. Set an example
Children notice how adults use technology. Putting phones aside during conversations, switching off work notifications and allowing time away from screens can help reinforce positive habits.



A Useful Conversation for Schools

Rather than asking pupils how many hours they spend online, consider asking:

"How do you know when being online has stopped being enjoyable?"

Their answers may reveal more about their digital wellbeing than screen-time figures alone.

Something to Share with Parents

Schools could use November as an opportunity to send a short reminder to parents about evening routines, online communication and encouraging children to speak up if something worries them.

The message needn't be complicated.

Healthy digital habits are built through understanding, balance and regular conversations, not restrictions alone.

Learn more about screen time here

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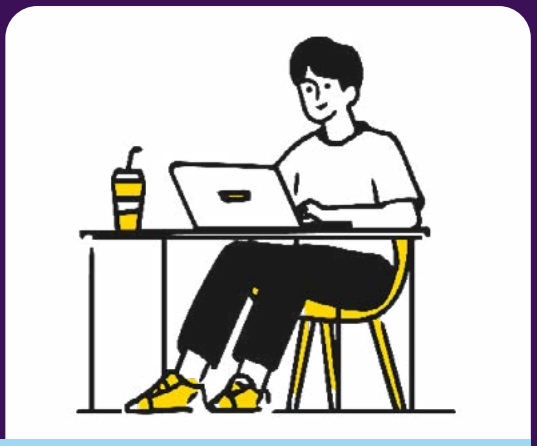

November Edition

WHEN AI BECOMES A COMPANION

AI Chatbots and Children's Emotional Wellbeing

Artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly familiar to children and young people.

Many already encounter AI through search engines, educational tools, gaming platforms and social media.

But there is another development worth understanding: AI chatbots designed to hold conversations that can feel personal, supportive and sometimes surprisingly human.

Some are marketed specifically as companions, allowing users to create virtual characters, establish ongoing conversations and interact with personalities designed around their interests. For children, these experiences may feel entertaining, comforting or reassuring.

However, there is an important difference between a chatbot that can generate a convincing response and a person who genuinely understands a child's circumstances.

Why Does This Matter?

AI companions can respond instantly, appear consistently interested and adapt their replies to a user's preferences.

This can make conversations feel unusually personal.

The concern is that some children may begin relying on these interactions for emotional reassurance, relationship advice or help with difficult situations.

AI responses can also be inaccurate, inappropriate or misleading.

Unlike a trusted adult, a chatbot cannot reliably recognise every safeguarding concern or provide the judgement and protection a child may need.

There are also privacy considerations when children share personal details, family difficulties or sensitive information.

What Can Schools Do?

Schools don't necessarily need to discourage every interaction with AI. Instead, they can help pupils recognise its limitations.

Useful conversations include:

- Why might a chatbot seem like a real friend?
- Does a convincing answer mean it's accurate?
- What personal information should never be shared?
- Who could you speak to if an AI conversation made you uncomfortable?

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ONLINE SAFETY NEWSLETTER



November Edition

Why is human support especially important when dealing with difficult feelings?

Staff should also understand that pupils may disclose concerns about AI interactions during ordinary safeguarding conversations.

These concerns should be taken seriously and handled through the school's established procedures.

The Key Message

AI can be an interesting and useful technology, but it shouldn't replace trusted relationships with friends, family, teachers or other supportive adults.

Children need to understand that a chatbot can simulate conversation, but it cannot replace genuine human care or safeguarding support.

Learn more about Ai chatbots here

Explore the Ai research here



A PRE-CHRISTMAS CYBER CHECK

Is Your School Ready for the Christmas Break?

With the end of term approaching, November is a useful opportunity for schools to review their cyber security arrangements.

Schools hold significant amounts of sensitive information, including pupil records, staff details, safeguarding information and financial data.

They also rely on interconnected systems for communication, administration and learning. A cyber incident can therefore have consequences far beyond the school network.

The question isn't simply whether your school has cyber security measures in place, but whether those measures would work when needed.



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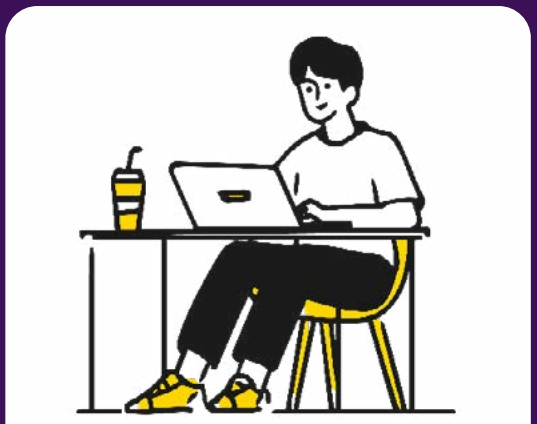

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Five Checks Worth Making Before the Holidays

1. Review staff access
Are accounts for former staff, temporary workers and contractors appropriately managed? Check that access permissions remain necessary and that accounts are disabled promptly when no longer required.

2. Check your backups
Confirm that important data is being backed up and that the school understands how information could be restored following an incident. A backup is only useful if recovery arrangements work.

3. Remind staff about phishing
Emails relating to invoices, deliveries, payments and account verification may be particularly convincing during a busy term. Encourage staff to verify unusual requests through trusted channels rather than responding directly to suspicious messages.

4. Review software updates
Ensure devices, systems and applications are receiving appropriate security updates. Any outstanding vulnerabilities should be reviewed and prioritised according to risk.

5. Know who to contact
If an incident occurs during the holidays, does the school know who is responsible for responding?Ensure relevant staff understand the reporting process, escalation arrangements and how to access essential contact information if normal systems are unavailable.

A Question for School Leaders

"If we discovered a cyber incident on the first day of the Christmas holidays, would everyone know what to do?"

If the answer is uncertain, now is a good opportunity to revisit those arrangements.

Cyber resilience isn't simply an IT responsibility. It requires cooperation between leadership teams, business managers, safeguarding leads, governors and technical staff.

Learn more about the DfE cyber standards here

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How Digital Safety CIC Can Help

Whether your school needs support reviewing its cyber readiness, understanding relevant standards or strengthening staff awareness, our team can provide practical advice.

Contact our team at info@ds-cic.com or click the logo above to discuss your school's digital safety priorities.Our cyber experts are here to help.

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November 2026



SAFER GAMING



SAFE ONLINE GAMING WITH OUR EXPERT GEORGE

Christmas Gaming: What Should Parents Know Before Buying?

With Christmas approaching, new consoles, games, accessories and gaming subscriptions are likely to feature on children's wish lists.

For many families, gaming is something to enjoy together. It can encourage problem-solving, creativity, cooperation and friendships.

But choosing an age-appropriate game involves more than simply looking at its popularity.

A game that everyone at school is talking about isn't necessarily suitable for every child.

Understanding Age Ratings

One of the most useful starting points is the PEGI age-rating system.

PEGI ratings provide guidance on the age suitability of a game's content, including factors such as violence, frightening scenes, language and sexual content. without context.

The familiar classifications include PEGI 3, 7, 12, 16 and 18.

However, an age rating doesn't explain every aspect of how a game works online.

A game may have an appropriate content rating while still offering interaction with other players, in-game purchases or user-generated content that deserves additional consideration.

Three Things Worth Checking

1. Can players communicate with strangers? Some multiplayer games allow voice chat, text messaging and contact with people a child doesn't know offline. Parents should understand what communication features are available and how they can be managed.

2. Can real money be spent? Virtual currencies, character skins, extra content and subscriptions can make gaming more expensive than the original purchase price. Check whether payment methods are saved and whether purchase approvals are enabled.

3. What content might children encounter? Some games include material created by other users or opportunities to access different experiences within the same platform. This means that age ratings and parental controls may need to be considered alongside active supervision and conversations about appropriate content.

Learn about safer gaming here!

November 2026

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November 2026



SAFER GAMING

November 2026

A Simple Starting Point

Before purchasing a new game, ask:

"Can you show me what you enjoy about this game and what happens when you play online?"

Understanding the appeal is often the best place to begin a conversation about safety.

New Console, New Game, New Safety Conversation

A new gaming device can be exciting, but it's worth spending a little time setting it up before children begin using it.

Modern gaming systems often include parental controls that can help families manage purchases, communication, screen time and access to age-restricted content.

These settings can provide an important starting point, but they work best alongside ongoing conversations.

A Christmas Gaming Checklist

- **Set up family accounts**
Where available, create an age-appropriate child account rather than allowing a younger child to use an unrestricted adult profile.

- **Review privacy settings**
Check who can see the child's profile, send friend requests, communicate through messages or join gaming sessions.

- **Manage spending**
Consider disabling automatic purchases, removing saved payment details or requiring adult approval for transactions.

- **Check communication settings**
Understand whether voice chat and messaging are enabled and how unwanted players can be blocked or reported.

- **Agree on gaming routines**
Discuss reasonable playing times, breaks and expectations around stopping a game.

- **Learn how to report concerns**
Make sure children know what to do if another player behaves inappropriately, requests personal information or makes them feel uncomfortable.

Gaming Together Makes a Difference

One of the simplest ways for adults to understand gaming is to take an interest in it.

You don't need to be an expert.

Ask children to show you their favourite game, explain how it works or introduce you to the characters they're interested in.

These small conversations provide opportunities to discuss online friendships, appropriate behaviour and what to do when something doesn't feel right.

Learn more about online gaming



November Edition

> *"FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION"*
>
> **Barbara Spooner, MBE**
> **CEO, Digital Safety CIC**



Reflecting on Our School Cyber Safety & Standards Conference 2026

Thursday 15 October 2026
The Sjøvoll Centre, Durham

Last month, **Digital Safety CIC and Framwellgate School Durham** brought together education professionals for our School Cyber Safety & Standards Conference 2026.

The event provided an opportunity to discuss the evolving challenges facing schools, share knowledge and explore practical approaches to strengthening cyber security and digital resilience.

With 60+ attendees, the conference demonstrated the importance of bringing education leaders and cyber specialists together to discuss issues affecting schools.

Turning Knowledge into Action

Conferences provide valuable opportunities to learn, but their real impact comes from the steps taken afterwards.

For school leaders, this may begin with reviewing existing arrangements and identifying where improvements would make the greatest difference.

Three Questions Worth Taking Back to School

1. Do we understand our current cyber risks? Consider whether leadership, IT and safeguarding teams have a shared understanding of the school's main digital vulnerabilities.

2. Are we confident in our current arrangements? Review how cyber security policies, technical safeguards, staff awareness and incident-response procedures work together.

3. What is our next practical step? Rather than trying to address everything at once, identify one or two achievable improvements that can be prioritised.

Continuing the Conversation

At Digital Safety CIC, our commitment is to help schools translate cyber awareness and technical guidance into practical improvements.

Whether that means reviewing existing arrangements, understanding the DfE's Digital and Technology Standards or developing a clearer approach to cyber resilience, our team is here to support you.

Thank you to everyone who attended and contributed to the event. To discuss how we can support your school, contact info@ds-cic.com.

Strengthen Your School's Digital Strategy Here

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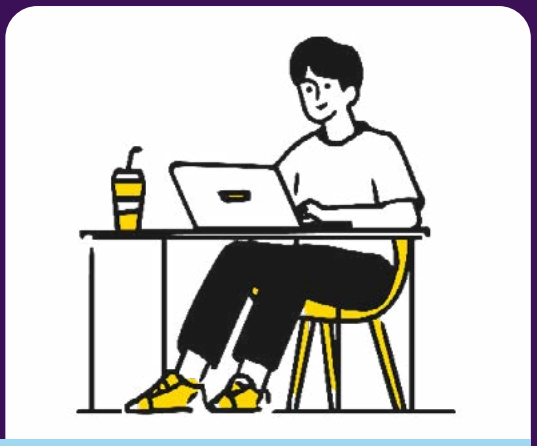

November Edition

SUPPORTING SAFER DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

Barbara Spooner, MBE
CEO, Digital Safety CIC



Helping Schools and Families Stay Connected, Informed and Safe

Digital safety is about more than protecting devices and systems.

It's about ensuring that children, families, schools and communities have the knowledge, confidence and support they need to navigate an increasingly connected world.

As we approach the end of the autumn term, we're encouraging schools to think about the practical steps they can take to strengthen digital safety before the Christmas holidays.

Whether it's providing parents with guidance on safer gaming, reviewing cyber security arrangements or helping staff feel more confident discussing emerging technologies, small actions can make a meaningful difference.

How Digital Safety CIC Can Support Your School

Our team can help schools:

- Strengthen cyber resilience and preparedness
- Review online safeguarding priorities
- Understand emerging online risks and technologies
- Build staff knowledge through practical training
- Support senior leaders with digital safety planning
- Develop safer digital environments for pupils and staff

Staying Connected with Our Communities

Through our wider work, including the National Lottery-funded LOOP community project, we also recognise the importance of making practical support and resources more accessible to local families.

Digital inclusion, access to trustworthy information and community collaboration all contribute to stronger, more resilient communities.

Looking Ahead

As the school term moves towards its final weeks, we'd encourage you to keep conversations about online safety open, share useful guidance with families and review any digital safety priorities that may need attention.

Our team is always happy to discuss how we can support your school.

Email info@ds-cic.com or visit www.ds-cic.com.