



# An Expert Insights special:



## School TikTok Handbook

### HOW TO MANAGE THE IMPACT OF TIKTOK IN YOUR SCHOOL

CREATED IN  
COLLABORATION WITH



**Lorna Ponambalum**  
Safeguarding and School  
Leadership Expert



**Anna Sarjantson**  
Founder of Screen-Safe



**Jessica Chalmers**  
Child Safety Online Expert



And more!

Coupling the **meticulous research** of TheSchoolBus team with the **specialist insights** and **extensive experience** of our expert contributors, we're giving you a **focussed and practical guide** that has been designed to give you:

Information on how to protect children from the risks of TikTok.

Tips for talking to children about TikTok, and teaching online safety.

Guidance on creating whole-school online safety strategies.

Advice on educating parents and engaging them in the conversation about TikTok and online safety.

Ready-made resources you can use to help you promote online safety while protecting your time.

# Meet our expert collaborators



**Lorna** is a strategic senior leadership professional and safeguarding and inclusion consultant, with 26 years of teaching and school leadership experience, including experience as a DSL, mental health lead, designated LAC teacher and attendance lead.

**Lorna** is now in her second term serving as a governor at a primary school in London leading on SEND provision, and does freelance consulting work where she offers safeguarding training, mentoring for DSLs, safeguarding audits and inclusion advice.

**Contact information:** For more information on how Lorna can help you, connect with her on LinkedIn [here](#).



**Jessica** is a child online safety expert and the founder of Social Jess, an organisation that runs workshops on online safety for parents, schools, business and charities. Jessica was formerly a social media manager, so she knows all about algorithms and social tech, and she became an online safety advocate after realising that the same tools she used to grow businesses posed a threat to child safety.

**Jessica's** workshops cover a range of topics, including gaming, social media and pornography.

**Contact information:** For more information on how Jessica can help you, visit Social Jess' website [here](#), or send her an email at [jess@socialjess.com](mailto:jess@socialjess.com). Jess also offers a lot of her advice on Instagram: @the\_socialjess.



**Anna** is the founder of Screen-Safe, an organisation that helps to support parents to help their children be safer online through workshops and online resources.

**Anna** delivers pupil workshops and parent talks about online safety, and works with schools to improve the digital landscape of pupils. She also offers a Parent Newsletter package for primary and secondary schools. She is also a governor at a secondary school.

**Contact information:** For more information on how Anna can help you, you can visit Screen-Safe's website [here](#), or send her an email at [anna@screen-safe.co.uk](mailto:anna@screen-safe.co.uk). You can also contact her through [LinkedIn](#) or through Instagram: @screensafeglobal.

Reports have shown that Education professionals are concerned by the number of emerging social and behavioural issues associated with TikTok, and it can be frustrating for school leaders to be expected to handle a widespread problem that they have limited influence over. **We asked 50 Education professionals some questions about TikTok. Here are some of their responses:**

**Q: What problems have you noticed at your school that are furthered by TikTok?**

**"Protests at schools [where] the children don't even know what they are protesting about"**  
– Primary School Leader

**"The willingness to be online... recording themselves and not understanding the impact and who can see that"**  
– Secondary School Teacher

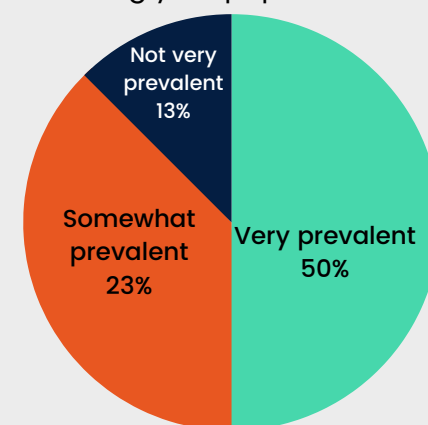
**"Students taking on anti-social TikTok challenges"**  
– Primary and Secondary School Leader

**"Casual racism and sexism are normalised"**  
– Primary School Leader

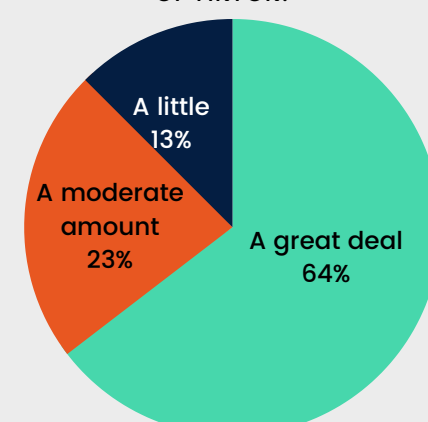
**"Self-harm, toxic masculinity, low self-esteem and body image"**  
– Secondary School Teacher

**"Drives a fair amount of poor behaviour and normalises it"**  
– Primary School Leader

**Q: How prevalent is TikTok among your pupil cohort?**



**Q: How much do you worry about the negative impact of TikTok?**



**Q: What particular concerns do you have about TikTok?**

**"The spreading of misinformation and lies directed at young people"**  
– Primary School Teacher

**"Inappropriate content and challenges, and a lack of response and responsibility from TikTok when issues are reported"**  
– Primary and Secondary School Leader

**"Radicalisation and encouraging children to self-harm"**  
– Primary and Secondary School Leader

**"Grooming is a real danger"**  
– Primary School Leader

**"The 'echo chamber' effect of the algorithms which channel children into ever more extreme videos"**  
– Primary School Leader






**"Abuse and bullying"**  
– Secondary School Leader

### What is TikTok?

TikTok is a **popular video-sharing social media platform** that allows its users to create and post short-form videos, as well as view, comment on, like, and share others' videos. The most popular types of content on TikTok in 2023 include:

- **Comedy** sketches.
- **Opinion** sharing and **informational** videos.
- **Self-improvement** videos, e.g. fitness, health and beauty tips.
- **Dancing** and **lip-syncing** videos.
- **Lifestyle** videos, e.g. videos of individuals sharing their day-to-day lives or telling personal stories.
- **Advice** and **'life hack'** videos.
- **Challenge** videos.

### Some TikTok stats

-  TikTok is used in over **150 countries**
-  It has over **9.2 million monthly active users** in the UK alone
-  It's been downloaded over **2.6 billion times** worldwide
-  The highest concentration of users by age is in the **10 and 19 age group (25%)**
-  Users spend **46 minutes** on the app per day on average



### How does the TikTok algorithm work?

The primary way users of TikTok consume content is through their 'For You' page, which is an **endless stream of videos** recommended by the **TikTok algorithm**. Everyone's 'For You' page will be **completely different**. From what we know about the algorithm, videos on someone's 'For You' page will be recommended to them based on the following factors:

- Accounts they **follow**.
- **Hashtags** they've clicked on or searched for.
- Videos they've **previously watched**.
- Terms that they've **searched**.
- Videos that are **popular with other users** of the same age they said they were when they signed up and who show similar viewing patterns to them.

### What are the issues for children on TikTok?

Young people using TikTok can easily come into contact with **harmful content** on the app. TikTok does have some safety measures in place to **protect younger people**, but younger children can, and do, **lie about their age** in order to use the platform without any age-related restrictions. TikTok's methods to filter certain content, such as content about suicide, sex and self-harm, can also be bypassed as its users have **invented ways to avoid these restrictions**, such as using terms like 'unalived' instead of 'killed', 'SA' instead of 'sexual assault', and 'corn' or the corn emoji instead of 'pornography'.

TikTok also hosts a lot of **misinformation and extremist content** that young, **impressionable minds** can take at face value. This can cause problems for schools in particular, and can prevent children from **learning and practising critical thinking**.

TikTok has also been known to expose children to **dangerous and damaging content** that affects their wellbeing and safety, e.g. deadly TikTok challenges and discriminatory ideology, and the way that content is used on the app can leave them particularly **vulnerable to grooming and radicalisation**.

TikTok is **not the problem in and of itself**; however, because of the way the platform is set up, TikTok, and other social media apps like it, is **exacerbating problems that already existed** outside of the school's range of sight. Those problems then **spill over into schools**, and schools are left to deal with the consequences.

### Can TikTok be child-friendly?

TikTok can be a child-friendly experience if it's **used responsibly**. It can be a great creative outlet for young people, as it can allow them to discover **new interests** and to **connect and communicate** with people who share those interests from **all over the world**.

Experiencing the benefits of TikTok can rely on **parental intervention** in their child's internet usage, which is not something schools can control. There are ways, however, that schools can help pupils be safer on TikTok.

## Should we be banning TikTok?

With all the problems it appears to be accelerating at the moment, it might seem like the obvious solution is banning the use of mobile phones and TikTok in schools, and lobbying for a ban on children using TikTok in general. We asked our experts what they thought about this:



"I believe that there are benefits to TikTok. TikTok isn't going anywhere, and children can still find a way to access it online, even if you ban it. It's far more useful to talk to children about the potential risks, what they are and what to do if they come across them, so that we can empower them. Our job is to make children resilient online, and they can't learn to be resilient in an increasingly digital world if they avoid it altogether. At the right age, with support and in a very controlled fashion, it's beneficial for them to experience it, so we can prepare them for adulthood."



"I know that sometimes when you're dealing with it you can't help but think 'oh, why don't they just ban TikTok!', but it's too big. What we have to do is embrace technology and teach children about responsibility. I think we need to make a big thing about the reasons behind age restrictions, because some children are simply too young; but there are some really good things about social media and we want to teach them to be digitally savvy because they're going to be adults in a world where that is going to be even more important."



"Social media is such a huge part of young people's lives now and that's not going to change. It's how they socialise, it's how they research everything, it's how they learn. It will help change their decisions and choices for the future. Children go to the internet for everything, so making sure they stay safe and use it in a positive way is important. We want to raise responsible and kind tech users who can self-regulate their use and enjoy all the benefits it has to offer. That takes time and consistency."

## What can we do about it?

When we asked Education professionals what they thought schools could do about the harmful side of TikTok, we had some interesting feedback. Most said that they thought **educating about online safety and embedding a culture of online safety** in school was important, but overwhelmingly, we were told that social media use is primarily **an issue for parents to monitor and control**, and that educating parents is vital. We agree, and that's why we've included **information on promoting parental engagement** and we've created **free resources for you to use**, including a TikTok parent handout and a guides to informing parents about aspects of online safety. Head to **page 8!**

Unfortunately, although schools have limited influence over pupils' use of TikTok, they are often to **forced to manage the impact of the harm it can do**, as the issues commonly manifest at school. Schools also have a **duty of care** to pupils and **statutory safeguarding duties** that can come into play due to the fallout of TikTok use.

We know this is **extremely frustrating**. So, for the next few pages of this handbook, we're going to enlist the help of our experts to give you **information and practical advice** on some of the key issues that we've been told by our surveyed Education professionals and our experts are prevalent in schools just now. We'll look at: **self-esteem and body image** (p4), **challenges** (p4), **grooming** (p5), **misogyny** (p5), **bullying** (p6), **misinformation** (p6), **TikTok protests** (p7) and **malicious social media accounts** (p7).



with Lorna

### Implementing online safety on a strategic level



1

#### Make it a priority!

"Online safety has got to be a school priority. You have to give it the kudos, the profile – it needs to be included in our school development plans. We need to be talking about it with our staff, giving them the opportunity to talk through the things they've come across with their colleagues and collaborate on next steps. We need to support our staff to learn more, perhaps by making it a part of their CPD. There are so many competing priorities for school staff, so we need to embrace online safety as a top safeguarding one, give our staff the time to focus on it, and get them onboard with making the online safety strategy a whole-school priority."

#### Have someone responsible for online safety across your school!

"Quite often, the responsibility for online safety is tacked onto the DSL role, but DSL is a huge role that has a lot of tasks assigned to it as it is. It could be worth having somebody in the designated safeguarding team who is primarily responsible for online safety, and creating and delivering an online safety strategy, supporting the staff with helping to implement it, and coordinating the response to online safety issues in the school."

2

3

#### Bring in external speakers to do online safety workshops!

"Obviously you have curriculum subjects like PSHE and RSHE, but delivering in-depth online safety teaching is just another thing that teachers and school leaders are expected to do on top of everything else. While internal teaching is vital, school staff typically don't have the expertise and time to really dig deep into these topics. I think the use of external speakers who are real specialists is an excellent idea. There are plenty of organisations who go into schools and deliver loads of online safety programmes for a living. Children are more likely to listen to an external speaker than their teacher or their parents. Creating room in the budget for these types of activities can pay off a lot in the longterm."

#### Integrate online safety teaching throughout the curriculum!

"It's not enough to do the odd lesson on online safety, say once a term. We have to raise the profile of online safety if we want to really help children to have an understanding of how to stay safe and respectful online. You can't do anything in isolation, and using themes in different subjects for conversations about online safety drip-fed throughout the curriculum is a really good way to help with that. Schools don't have much of a choice but to be outcomes-focussed and to prioritise things like assessments, but safeguarding is so crucial, we have to prioritise it."

4

5

#### Collaborate with parents!

"As schools, there's only so much we can do, as being successful in protecting children online requires engagement from parents. A lot of parents still find technology that their kids are using challenging, especially if they have a lot of children and have a lot of competing priorities in their lives. We need to put the information out there and support parents to understand it – for example, through newsletters, handouts, targeted emails to parents of affected year groups, parent workshops, posts on school websites and social media accounts, etc.. Obviously it's reliant on the parents to use that information, but we have to do what we can to get it out there and engage them." *More information about parent engagement is on page 6.*

### Self-esteem and body image

Studies have shown that body image and self-esteem in general have been worsened by the spread of social media and that the group most affected appears to be girls aged 10 to 14 – a group already susceptible to self-esteem issues. Social media is full of people displaying a perfectly-curated account of their lives which amplifies their assets and accomplishments and omits their flaws and setbacks. Impressionable pupils may not recognise that what they're seeing isn't authentic, and this can make pupils feel as though they are failing and lead to harmful emotional consequences, such as thoughts of suicide, dangerous attention-seeking behaviour, and eating disorders.



with Anna

**Anna** says: "We've been used to filters for a while, but TikTok almost takes it to **another level**. With some of the filters – for example, 'Teenage Face' and 'Bold Glamour' – there's nothing positive that can come from them. As adults, we're able to switch off more easily, and think the filters are ridiculous. **Children's brains can't do that**, so they look at it and they feel really good about how they look, they post content with the filters on and they get lots of likes. Then it becomes an **addictive system** of looking at themselves through that frame, and then instantly feeling **deflated and not good enough** when they look in a normal mirror."



**Teenage Face** – a filter that makes adults look like teenagers. This filter is convincing, and has been accused of exacerbating self-esteem issues as well as making it easier for adults to impersonate children.

**Bold Glamour** – a filter that uses AI to completely transform a users face by digitally adding makeup and altering the facial structure, including thinning the nose, raising the cheeks and plumping the lips.



#### Warning signs of low self-esteem



##### Self-deprecating comments and jokes

This could be a symptom of self-esteem issues and a negative perception of themselves. People often use self-deprecating humour as a way to protect themselves against the negative feelings they assume people have about them. They may be looking for validation and reassurance that other people don't actually feel that way about them.

##### Struggling to accept praise

Pupils who have low self-esteem are likely to struggle to accept praise as being genuine. Even where they have achieved something really positive, they may undermine their own achievement.

##### Displaying a fear of failure

All pupils will, at one time or another, say things like 'I can't do this!' or 'it's too hard!' But it's a different story if they're saying these things constantly, about multiple things and even things they're particularly good at.

### How to promote positive self-esteem and body image

#### Teach about unrealistic online expectations

As part of your **wider commitment** to online safety, it's a good idea to dedicate some time throughout the curriculum to **self-esteem and body image**, as well as self-comparison to influencers online. You can emphasise that **puberty has a big impact on physical appearance**, and that weight gain, growth spurts, acne and changes in their body are normal and natural.

**Anna** says: "In terms of teaching, we need to focus on **what's real online and what's fake**. We need to remind children – not just girls because it's happening to boys too – that, actually, nobody is like that in real life. As adults, we fall into the trap of thinking that's obvious and that we all know that, but as a child, you don't, and you're spending hours every day looking at this content to the point your brain is being conditioned to think that's what you're supposed to be like."

#### Create a body-positive school culture

At the leadership level, creating a body-positive culture can come from a few different strategies. Some examples are:

- **Ensuring that staff are educated about modelling positive body image**, e.g. by avoiding self-deprecating talk in front of pupils, and avoiding the kinds of comments that can trigger a person to compare themselves to others.
- **Ensuring that goals**, e.g. for attainment or attendance, **are set for individual pupils in line with their abilities and unique circumstances**, avoiding competitive attainment goals and strict school-wide goals and standards, as this can encourage perfectionism and comparison to others.
- Ensuring that school uniforms are designed in such a way that can **suit a diverse range of sizes and shapes**.
- Promoting **wellbeing and self-love** throughout the school, e.g. by using internal messaging to celebrate diversity in appearance and life experiences.
- Keeping on top of **analysing bullying data you collect**, and introduce targeted interventions in year groups or social groups where bullying around appearance or lifestyle occurs most frequency.



with Jessica

### Online challenges

Online challenges are not new – they've been around since the birth of social media. Arguably, however, they've become even bigger and more risky with TikTok. There have been many reports of children hurt, and even killed, by challenges that can be traced back to TikTok and other social media platforms, and it's important to teach pupils about keeping themselves safe when they're participating in these trends.

**Jessica** says: "During an experiment conducted at UCLA, researchers showed teenagers their own photos on a computer screen with a randomly generated number of 'likes'. The higher number of likes they had, the **more activity was shown in their brain's reward circulatory system**. That's why I think TikTok can be a bit of a problem. Teenagers are **desperate for likes**, and that's why they end up doing **slightly more risky stuff** than they normally would because it's going to get them more attention. TikTok challenges can be fun, they can be silly and they can be **downright dangerous**. I think you just have to be really honest with children. Talk to them about TikTok and the things that go around on there, and **remind them of the dangers** – that people have died and been seriously hurt, and that these videos of them doing these challenges will be a part of their digital footprint forever."



### How to respond to online challenges

#### Avoid naming or showing dangerous challenges

If you specifically name an online challenge to pupils, this could end up **spreading the challenge's reach**, as they may get curious and search the challenge on TikTok. This could lead to their algorithm **showing them numerous videos of the challenge**. It's more productive to focus on general advice that can help a pupil **evaluate whether a challenge is safe** or not, and can help them **self-regulate** if a challenge or video they see upsets them.

#### Establish a safe space so pupils can come to you with concerns

It's vital to ensure that pupils know **who they can go to** if they're concerned about something they've seen online, and that they feel **empowered to speak up** if they're worried. This could include providing a drop-in session every week, a **named staff member**, e.g. the DSL, or a **message box** to write concerns in anonymously, e.g. for a PSHE class. Remind pupils that their concerns will be **responded to without judgement**, and the goal isn't to spy on their online activity, but to ensure their mental and physical wellbeing is protected.

#### Give pupils the tools to handle peer pressure

Many pupils are drawn to participate in online challenges **by peer pressure**. Teaching pupils what peer pressure looks like, why it isn't okay to peer pressure others, and how to resist peer pressure can really help pupils to develop personal boundaries and **be able to make their own choices** about their online activity.

#### Let parents know if a challenge causes an issue in school

Parents are often **best placed to protect their child** from dangerous online challenges. Due to the fact that school staff will see multiple children from one age group at once, however, they're **more likely to spot concerning trends** than parents. This means it's a good idea to inform parents if you've noticed a trend that could affect or involve their child. See our resources for parents on page 7 for some help with doing this.

## Grooming

The NSPCC reported an 80% rise in online grooming incidents over four years, with an average of 120 incidents per week in 2021/2022. TikTok has famously been a platform with a high prevalence of grooming incidents and predators. There have been a number of reports of predators beginning their attempts to groom children within minutes of posting dancing videos, and a recent investigation found that children as young as eight are being groomed on the app.



with Anna and Jessica

**Anna** says: "There's always the risk of grooming. I think **people can underestimate** that and think, well that doesn't happen on TikTok because they're just watching silly videos; but if that account isn't set down as a private account, a child is **literally out there to the world**. Anyone can see and anyone can contact them. Unfortunately, as with all these platforms, there's **plenty of predators on there that know exactly what to look for** and how to look for the type of accounts where there is someone who will start talking to them or be vulnerable to being groomed. So that is a huge risk."



### Warning signs a pupil is being groomed



**Has unexplained new possessions, e.g. expensive jewellery or electronics**

Perpetrators can manipulate children through buying them gifts. A pupil who is being groomed may show up to school frequently with new possessions, and can't or won't explain how they got them.

**Is withdrawing from their friends and spending more time on their phone**

Many groomers will manipulate pupils into isolating themselves from others to maximise their control. Pupils may spend less time with their friends and more time on their phones.

**Is using sexualised language or behaviour inappropriate for their age**

In many cases of grooming, children will sadly be subjected to sexual abuse or harassment in some form. This means they may know things about sex that they shouldn't yet know, or may use inappropriately sexual language.

**Is missing from school more often**

Pupils who are being groomed may have more regular absences, or may skip after-school activities they previously enjoyed partaking in. When they do come to school, they may be particularly tired and could be acting disinterested.

### Teach about the five stages of grooming for sexual abuse

**Jessica** says: "If we talk to parents and children about the five stages of grooming, which helps them to understand how predators are coercing the children, we can empower them with the information so that if ever that kind of thing happens to them, they know exactly what to do."

#### Targeting

Offenders target a vulnerable child. They may pretend to be a child in the same age group, but often, they target children within their close friend or family circle.

#### Gaining access

Offenders build trust with a child, making them feel special by giving them excessive attention and/or gifts. Children with a past including emotional abuse may be in particular danger.

#### Trust development

Offenders become a constant presence in a child's life and blur the lines between normal and abnormal adult-child relationships. A child will mostly be unaware that the relationship is inappropriate.

#### Desensitisation

Offenders begin to desensitise a child to sexual touch and content. This can include gradually increasing physical contact and sending sexual content to the child to normalise it and facilitate sexual abuse.

#### Maintaining control

Offenders use secrecy, shame, extortion and manipulation to maintain control over a child. This can prolong the relationship and dissuade them from telling a trusted adult.

## Misogyny

There has been a number of reports lately about the harm that Andrew Tate is causing and the trend of misogynist ideology. Some experts have attributed Tate's popularity to the idea that young men are feeling villainised by the current prevalence of the discussion around violence against women and girls and 'male privilege'. Many young boys have been attracted to the idea of strong masculinity and using that to make success and money, and have become radicalised towards the idea that men are inherently superior and women are supposed to belong to them.



with Lorna

**Lorna** says: "I don't think you can do anything **in isolation**. Andrew Tate is **fueling an existing problem**. We need to be supporting our boys. Some of the things that Andrew Tate says are just things that any motivational speaker will say and when young boys are struggling with their self-esteem and feeling like they can't do anything right in today's environment, having someone tell them that they deserve success and money can be appealing. All many children see is the **fast cars and all of his success**. So it's getting children to understand that there's **a hidden message there**, and that some of the things he says are misogynistic. We have to get them to understand that violence against women and girls starts from language, and then it just **builds up until we get to serious violence**."



### How to talk to boys about Andrew Tate

#### Recognise the underlying problem

Some boys see Andrew Tate as an icon. His ideas provide simple solutions to the insecurity many boys are dealing with. Recognising that these boys may be attracted to these ideas because of their own insecurity and vulnerability rather than an inherent hatred of women may help us to approach these conversations more gently.

#### Try not to criticise Tate too harshly

Andrew Tate has propagated the idea of the 'matrix', which is the idea that mainstream society has been indoctrinated to believe certain things and that it punishes 'free thinkers' like himself. This means that saying directly that Andrew Tate is wrong and criticising him harshly may immediately cause his supporters to disregard your words as being symptomatic of the indoctrination in the matrix, or it may make them feel as though you're criticising them directly. It's best to interrogate the ideas at the heart of Tate's ideology, instead of Tate himself.

#### Build up the conversation incrementally

Jumping immediately to direct conversations about Andrew Tate may inadvertently provoke defensiveness on the part of pupils who support him. It's a good idea to build up towards a conversation about his specific ideas by integrating discussions of central themes, such as consent, gender equality and societal misogyny, into the curriculum more widely.

#### Listen to boys without shutting them down

A lot of young boys are feeling demonised at the moment by discussions of male privilege and the overdue prioritisation of marginalised voices in current conversations about discrimination. Asking questions about the reasons they're attracted to Andrew Tate's ideas and listening to them talk about their anxieties, keeping the conversation focussed on their feelings at first before progressing to discussing the specific ideas, can be important. It's important to maintain firm boundaries in the overall conclusions, for example not budging on the idea that rape is unacceptable and that the only person responsible for rape is the perpetrator and not the victim, but avoid shutting them down completely if they say something that isn't quite right. Leading with empathy is important, but so is making sure that harmful beliefs are questioned and alternative views are presented.



with



Lorna and Anna

## Bullying

Bullying has always been a problem in schools, but online bullying has added an additional dimension in recent years. According to recent research by security.org, 64% of children using TikTok have experienced some form of cyberbullying, and TikTok has been criticised for being quite a 'hateful' platform, even by some of its most prominent influencers. Whether bullying begins online or in school, the online world can quickly escalate bullying to extremes given the ease of posting online, the illusion of separation between in-person and online actions, and the inability to see the victim's reaction to mean words.

**Lorna** says: "What we've seen a lot is pupils getting into TikTok and posting things, and then other pupils taking that video and adding extra bits on to it **calling them names** and saying very unkind things about them.

Pupils also make **multiple accounts to post unkind things** to others more anonymously, and that can be very hard to keep up with as a school leader. Then, what happens is that those online relationships spill over into school and children who are on the receiving end **feel very vulnerable and don't know how to react to that**. Because this bullying is now part of their life whether they're at home on their phone or at school, **it becomes all-consuming**, and we need to talk to children about being respectful, about how they can get support if they're being bullied, and about the **real-life consequences of their online actions**."



**Anna** says: "On any viral video on TikTok, you can click on it and see thousands of comments that go from **extreme worshipping to just abusive, horrible comments**. On this platform, even amongst adults, it's rare you'll see something mild like 'I don't personally

agree with your opinion'; critiques are **typically so vile and personal**, and you even get people saying they want horrible things to happen to others. Children are **inadvertently conditioning their brains** at such a young age to think those extremes are acceptable and they become completely **desensitised** to treating people in that way. It normalises **such extreme reactions** to other people and saying whatever you feel in the moment because it feels like there's **no consequences** and you **can't see the effect** it's having on the other person."

### How to handle cyberbullying in schools

#### Work on emphasising community

Because children are spending so much time on their phones, extreme reactions to other people and sending hate and vitriol to someone virtually has become normalised, as they're seeing so much of it on platforms like TikTok. As **Anna** says, "after the pandemic and the rise of social media for children, they're not used to sitting face-to-face with people and interacting anymore".

**Lorna** suggests that intervening here is crucial, and that schools are well-placed to emphasise the importance of community harmony and empathy for others. She says: "I'm doing something with a class called 'Circle of Friends', and it's this whole idea that, while you don't have to like everybody or be everybody's friend, you are all peers and you have a responsibility to be kind and respectful to each other. We take examples of bullying and help the children understand everyone's feelings and point of view. We help them to understand how much their words can hurt other people, and the importance of being kind on and offline."

#### Promote a culture of reporting cyberbullying

Making sure all pupils know where they can go and who they can speak to if they're experiencing cyberbullying is vital, but it doesn't stop there. If cyberbullying reports are not fully investigated, if proper pastoral support is not put in place for pupils who have been on the receiving end of cyberbullying, and if perpetrators are not sanctioned for their behaviour and given pastoral support to reflect on and change their behaviour, pupils will not feel safe reporting their experiences in the long-run, because they'll feel as though it's futile. This needs to be a concentrated effort from all angles and in all aspects.

#### Ensure pupils are given advice on responding to negativity online

This includes advising them not to respond to hateful comments, equipping them with coping mechanisms they can use if they're upset with something someone has said to them online, e.g. advising them to put their phone away for a while and interact with someone they trust in real life, and providing spaces for them to discuss their experiences with other people who have been on the receiving end of hateful comments online. It's very important to ensure that pupils are reminded that the negative communication patterns that they see online are not normal or okay, and that it's okay to tell a trusted adult and distance themselves from the situation.

## Misinformation

There is a significant amount of misleading content and misinformation on TikTok. Many children have not yet got the life experience and developmental capability to understand and critically evaluate the credibility of information, and many will simply believe what they see without validating whether it's true. Research reports have shown that nearly 20% of videos on TikTok contain misinformation, and 80% of a subsection of videos reviewed by medical professionals were found to be misleading and potentially damaging.



with Jessica

**Jessica** says: "We need to talk to children about weighing up what they see online and thinking critically about it. Children will see a video on TikTok and believe it without realising that probably **80% of what they're seeing is opinion** rather than fact. We need to challenge them to think about what the agenda of the person speaking might be, verify the information using a reputable source, and just generally maintain healthy scepticism about what they see online. A report recently found that, for the first time, social media is the most popular news source for 12- to 15-year-olds, and 28% of teenagers are using TikTok for news, despite the fact there's of teenagers are using TikTok for news, despite the fact there's **no clickable links on TikTok**, so there's no sources provided for the information in the video and no easy way to check it."



### How to teach about critical thinking

#### Signpost to fact-checking practices and websites

Promoting fact-checking practices, such as the CRAP test, and websites throughout your school can be helpful. You could make posters to hang around the hallways, you could post it to your social media accounts, and you could inform parents about them too. For fact-checking websites, Jessica suggests [snopes.com](https://snopes.com), which fact-checks viral social media videos and rumours.

#### The CRAP test

Jessica says that a good way to teach pupils about misinformation is by teaching the CRAP test to help them analyse whether a source is fully accurate. CRAP stands for:

- **C** – currency. When was the video posted? How recent is the information included?
- **R** – reliability. Does the video point to sources that back up the information? Do credible sources such as broadsheet newspapers or journal articles support what is being said?
- **A** – authority. Does the poster have qualifications or experience to back them up?
- **P** – purpose. Could the person be biased? Is what they're saying opinion or fact? Is there an ulterior motive, such as convincing you to buy something?

#### Integrate critical thinking skills throughout the curriculum

Teaching pupils critical thinking skills is vital for all areas of life, and it's relevant to all curriculum subjects. Being able to identify where a source is credible, whether a source has an agenda or if it's neutral, how to challenge their own preconceived notions and those of others.

For example, in history, literature and modern studies, we can analyse primary sources and works and talk about who wrote the source, what their motivation might have been, what the context of when the source was written and what that can tell us about what's being said. This can then apply to all information they see or hear, online or otherwise.

This can be implemented on a whole-school level by prioritising encouraging pupils to question what they read and hear, and using a teaching strategy that invites them to draw their own conclusions rather than directing them in any particular direction.

## TikTok Protests

Schools throughout England have been experiencing protests by pupils, typically about school policies or cultures of sexual harassment. Unfortunately, because some protests went viral on TikTok, a number of copycat protests have surfaced, even in schools that don't have these policies. These protests quite often involve pupils behaving anti-socially and could result in them putting themselves and others at risk. It's important to treat this as a safeguarding issue. Here are some tips:

### Take preventative actions.

Take a positive approach to pupil dissent overall. It's frustrating to face criticism of policies and your handling of complex societal issues from pupils, because we, as adults, know that many pupils don't yet understand the intricacies of running a school or the complexities of organisational and societal structures, and may struggle to understand why there needs to be rules around things like dress. Pupils do, however, have valid thoughts and issues with certain policies that directly impact their lives, and when they feel as though the school doesn't take those thoughts and issues seriously, regardless of whether they do or don't, they are more likely to resort to protests as a method of getting their voices heard.

If no protests have broken out at your school, it may be a good idea to take some preventative action and work to include pupils' opinions in the drafting and reviewing of policies that directly impact their lives, such as uniform and toilet policies. This could be done through strengthening the role and credence given to any student councils, and bolstering the links between management and those councils. If a change can't be made, explaining to them exactly why that change can't be made may be more effective than shutting their line of questioning down.

Ensure that pupils have both informal and formal routes to raise concerns, and ensure those concerns are addressed in some way when they are raised, even if it is just an in-depth explanation on why the school can't make changes. A number of pupils have spoken out online about their feelings that, while student councils and formal concern routes are in place, their concerns aren't addressed when they use them, so making sure you give some kind of response can help to circumvent the risk of pupils resorting to protest.

Genuinely listen to pupils' opinions with empathy, and reflect on your policies when they raise an issue they say is deeply affecting them to see if changes can be made without sacrificing the school's needs and obligations. There may be some room for compromise, or the change may actually be possible to make.

### Emphasise the safeguarding concerns to both pupils and parents.

Taking the time to outline how protests can put pupils at risk is important, as it ensures you're showing that shutting down protests and advising against them is not an attempt to suppress pupils' voices, but an attempt to keep them safe. This will likely be particularly effective with parents. If you have identified any particular risks, it may be worth outlining what they are, so that those who are sceptical of your intentions around not supporting the protests don't think you're using safeguarding as an excuse, since there are genuine safeguarding risks with pupils engaging in these protests.

### Prepare your staff for potential protests.

Ensure you have a strategy for handling potential protests, so staff know exactly what they need to do if one breaks out in your school. You should also remind them to pay attention to any rumblings they may hear among pupils that could indicate dissent is forming, so they can pass it along to the SLT, who may be able to speak to pupils and get ahead of the issue. Either way, it's important your staff are aware when you suspect that a protest may happen, and are supported to handle it.

### Implement fair behavioural sanctions.

At the end of the day, peaceful protest is a right in the UK and this is encompassed within the same British Values you teach throughout your curriculum. Navigating behavioural sanctions when a protest breaks out can be a difficult line to walk because of this. Obviously in certain situations, e.g. when there's been harassment of staff, harm caused to other pupils, property damage or public disturbance, sanctions are justified inherently, as these actions undermine the concept of a 'peaceful protest' and are not protected by those rights. This means you can sanction these activities in line with your behaviour policy as you normally would in other circumstances.

Although pupils have the right to peaceful assembly, they also have a right to safety, and where you can see that the actions of pupil protestors infringe on the right to safety of themselves and others, this could potentially be sanctioned in line with your behaviour policy. It may be a good idea to get legal advice on sanctions for protests if you're unsure, just to make certain you're not infringing on the rights of pupils.

## Malicious TikTok Accounts Targeting Staff

There has been a trend recently of fake accounts set up online, particularly on TikTok, that target schools, harass staff and make malicious allegations about school practices or staff. This can have a profound impact on the mental wellbeing of staff and cause reputational damage to both individuals and the school as a whole.



### So how do we handle this?

**Keep tabs on things posted about your school and staff and report accounts through the Professionals Online Safety Helpline on 0344 381 4772 or [helpline@saferinternet.org.uk](mailto:helpline@saferinternet.org.uk).**

The best way to solve the immediate problem is to report the account and have it taken down. This will remove the power from the poster and remove all harmful content that they posted from the internet. This doesn't necessarily solve the problem long-term, however, as there's nothing stopping a person from simply making a new account and posting the videos, or similar videos again.

### Provide emotional support for any staff targeted.

School leaders have a duty of care to protect staff members from third-party harassment. If a member of staff is being harassed online, the headteacher should explain to them how they intend to address the concern and offer them support, e.g. via internal and external counselling or wellbeing services. Responses to individual staff members should be tailored to their individual needs. If the staff member is unaware of the comments, you should be sensitive in informing them about it, and potentially take external advice, e.g. from the LA or a legal professional, about whether or how to tell them.

### Manage reputational damage.

If you see an account with some damaging allegations, don't panic or feel pressured into making a statement right away. You need to be particularly careful if there are any safeguarding-related allegations included, as you have an obligation to protect your staff members' identities when there are allegations against them. You should seek legal advice before commenting publicly where an active investigation is underway. If the time is right, you may wish to consider preparing a statement for your school community in line with your school's policies.

### Conduct your own investigation on the account.

You are unlikely to be able to get the account owner's identity from TikTok, e.g. by requesting it, as this would violate their privacy policy. If the situation involves a criminal offence, the police may be able to retrieve some information, but these investigations often result in dead ends, as people will often use fake names to sign up or use public computers or VPNs to anonymise their IP address. There's nothing to stop you conducting your own investigation, however, which can be done in the following steps:

Gather evidence

- Identify a staff member to investigate, preferably someone from the DSL team.
- Once pupils catch on that you're investigating the page, it will likely be deleted and you'll lose potential leads, so keep the investigation under wraps until you've gathered the information you need.
- Take screenshots of the profile and make notes of usernames that interact with the content or follow the account, which you'll be able to see by going into the comments section and by looking at the 'Following' and 'Followers' lists. This may give you an idea of the peer groups involved.
- Look for clues within the content itself. For example, if the content revolves around a certain class or a certain staff member, certain pupils may be ruled out and others may be shortlisted.

Talk to people

- If you've found any usernames which correspond to pupils in your school, this can give you a good list of people to talk to. You should give pupils the opportunity to share any information they may have. Many pupils won't want to 'rat out' their friends or peers, but you may be able to discern some clues from their answers to your questions. These interviews may be better with only one pupil at a time, as peer pressure not to speak will be stronger if multiple pupils are there.
- Do assemblies or group talks with peer groups or year groups that contain people who are likely to be involved. Several members of staff should be present to monitor pupils' reactions.
- Talk to relevant staff to see if they can shed light on who could be involved.

Apply sanctions

- These accounts are often created in jest, and many pupils simply haven't thought about or don't understand the significant emotional impact that these accounts and their posts have on staff members, and don't understand that what they're doing may be considered harassment or even defamation. Ensuring pupils understand the severity of the issue may put a halt to the behaviour in itself.
- If you find specific responsible pupils, you can apply sanctions in line with your behaviour policy.

**Safeguarding concerns may show up in protests and malicious social media accounts in the form of low-level concerns or allegations against staff members. It's important not to treat these as malicious allegations right away. You should investigate these just as you would investigate allegations if they came through normal channels, in line with part four of 'Keeping children safe in education'.**

## Some more tips on creating a whole-school online safety strategy



with  
Anna

"I would encourage schools to look at each year group individually and think: **'what are the key risks for those children?'** And then just take one thing and **really focus on that throughout the year** in various ways so that it **keeps being threaded throughout**, and it's not just a quick half hour chat. In Year 7, it might be **cyberbullying** because that's when they start mixing with so many new children, and you see them leaving people out, spreading rumours, etc.. When they're higher up, you might start seeing the **sending of nudes and sextortion**. A lot of staff will find some of these things very difficult to talk about, and it might be difficult to relate to a room of children, especially if they've never been on TikTok themselves. We do need to be having **hard-hitting conversations in an age-appropriate way**, but **without holding back**. These aren't just chats you can fit in at the start of a lesson, so if you find a particular trend, it's a good idea to **focus on it and thread it through everything** for a period of time."





**Jessica** says:

### 1. Inform parents about parental controls on TikTok

"Too many parents don't understand that they can actually monitor and restrict their child's use of TikTok in order to safeguard them online. Giving parents information about parental controls is really important. People often panic at the thought of managing the tech, and this puts them off before they even start. But actually it's not that tricky, and if parents took 20 minutes to sit down with their child and set that up, it may make everyone's lives a lot easier. It's really key that parents set up family pairing and use that as an opportunity to discuss why it's important for them to have private accounts and to lock the chat feature so they can only talk to friends."

### 2. Educate parents on digital literacy

"A lot of parents have got a very different experience of social media to their children. For example, my social media is a lovely community of people where everyone is really nice to each other and I see posts of support, interior design ideas and birthday cake inspiration! But if you look at cases which have been in the news recently, a lot of children will use the exact same platform but have that be filled with self-harm and suicide content."

A lot of parents don't understand how the TikTok algorithm works, and there a lot of murky corners online. The algorithm is tailored to the individual person, so your child's experience will be completely different to yours. If I didn't do this job, I'd think that social media was lovely and not consider the risks – but, of course, there's a dark gloomy side, and parents need to be aware that their child will see a different side to the app than the one they're seeing."

### 3. Ensure parents understand the importance of setting up TikTok under their child's actual age

"If a child lies about their age to use TikTok without age restriction, the algorithm is going to assume that's their age and show them content watched by other people that age. If a child says they're 18, they'll be shown adult content. Many parents are setting up underage accounts on TikTok thinking it's just harmless lip-syncing and dancing. If a parent helps their 8-year-old child set up a TikTok account, the algorithm will think they're at least 13. So, by the time they're actually 13, the algorithm is going to think they're 18, and is going to be showing them adult content. Parents I've spoken to about this don't know it's happening, and I've had parents coming up to me after workshops saying that it's changed their perspective on allowing their children to have social media when they're underage."

### 4. Help them to understand their child's digital footprint

"From the moment they make their first post or write their first comment online, that's the start of their digital footprint, and that will follow them for the rest of their lives. There's people in admissions offices at universities and in HR departments whose job it is to look at their digital footprints. 1 in 10 colleges revoke places because of digital footprint – this does really happen. Parents tend to be very receptive to this, and I've had parents come up to me sharing stories of times when they, or people they know, have decided not to offer jobs to people because of what they've found on online searches."



**Anna** says:

### 1. Find creative ways to make parents understand

"It's important to raise awareness to parents in new ways. I did hear someone phrase it really well, and I can't remember who it was to quote them, but they said: if you were walking down the road and there was a building and it said, 'all children welcome', and you went inside. In one corner, you've got strippers; in another corner, people are selling drugs; in another corner, people are fighting till they were nearly killing each other; and then there are these weird people walking around wanting to talk to your child. Would you let them go in on their own and just say, I'll pick you up in three hours?"

We need to make parents understand that this is effectively what they're doing when they just let them sit on TikTok or Snapchat in their bedroom through the night. They're just opening them to the world of strangers and the very people you would want to protect your child from. And that's a change in mindset for our generation, I think, because we always thought about stranger danger in the way of getting in strange vans, whereas this is so much more dangerous. They're less likely to have something happen just by going to the park when you are connecting them to millions of professional predators who know exactly what they're doing and have all the tools to do it."

### 2. Emphasise the importance of restricting screen time

"If I could only give one tip to parents, it would be to never have any devices in their bedroom at night. If that's the only thing that parents change, it'll still make a big difference, because that's where a lot of things start to go wrong."

### 3. Keep parents on side with teaching

"When we're threading online safety throughout the curriculum, it's important we get parents onboard and ideally replicating and continuing the learning at home. Many parents feel uncomfortable with their young children being exposed to, or having conversations with them about, topics such as grooming and pornography because they feel like they're ruining the innocence of their child and introducing them to these ideas. Schools have to tread such a fine line between having these necessary conversations while maintaining the age-appropriate nature. Some parents can tend to put the blinkers on and say things like 'he's only nine, he's not viewing pornography', but we know this age is getting younger and younger as accessibility increases. There are age appropriate ways to have these conversations with younger pupils with impact and adapt as they go through school. Year 6 particularly is a crucial year in preparing children AND parents for secondary school. It is so important that awareness is raised in parents as to what children are really seeing and doing online today so they understand the importance of these conversations and lessons, if they want to equip their child with the resilience and skills to have a healthy online experience. Schools, parents and children all need to work and support each other.."



**We know that parents are the key to ensuring a child remains safe online. After all, children spend most of their phone time out of school. Schools definitely have a role to play in engaging parents, but this can sometimes be time-consuming. At TheSchoolBus, we know that our users' time is valuable, and that's why we've produced the following resources to help you with engaging parents:**

- **[TikTok Informational Parent Handout](#)**

*Gives all the info parents need to know to help them get educated on the dangers of TikTok and strategies to support their children to be safer online.*

- **[Guide to Informing Parents About Harmful Content](#)**

*Gives guidance about how to engage parents in the discussion around harmful content that's become prevalent amongst pupils. It includes sample wording for letters and emails*

- **[Guide to Informing Parents About Their Expected Behaviour](#)**

*Gives guidance about how to engage parents in their own behavioural obligations and how to remind them of what the behavioural standards they're held up against are. It includes sample wording for letters and emails*



**Lorna** says:

### 1. Remind parents that online safety is a priority

"As schools, we can only do so much. Parents are still finding technology a challenge, and aren't aware of the dangers. When children are in primary school, the parent audience is a bit more captive, but when children get to secondary school, they loosen the reins a bit and become a bit less aware of what their children are doing online. Often they have multiple children and a lot of competing priorities. It's important to remind parents that online safety is an important priority to have."

### 2. Diversify your methods of getting in contact

"Parents can be really difficult to get hold of and to engage in these issues, especially when their children are older, so try a number of approaches. Send out targeted emails and letters to parents of affected year groups, to put information on the school website, post on any school social media accounts, and run targeted workshops for them."

When I was a safeguarding lead, we ran online safety workshops for parents that weren't very well-attended, so we took opportunities to run them when parents were in school anyway – like on transition days – and had to attend them!"

### 3. Keep parents updated on what goes on

"Informing them of issues happening in the school and offering them advice on how to handle those conversations at home is an important thing."

We always send out emails and letters when an issue happens, and we find that when there's an incident, parents are far more inclined to really listen."

### 4. Keep parents engaged in conversation

"It's useful to get feedback from parents – for example, through surveys – about what they already know so knowledge gaps can be addressed."

Bring up online safety when you have one-to-one chats with parents, e.g. parents' evenings, because they're more likely to take it in when you've got them right in front of you."

All we can do is put the information out there and hope that they take it onboard, but we can also chase them up and ask them if they've seen what we're posting and what they think about it."

## More resources – FREE to users of TheSchoolBus



- [Online Safety Policy](#)
- [Primary Child-friendly Online Safety Policy](#)
- [Online Safety Presentation for Parents](#)
- [Pupils' Use of Social Media: a Letter to Parents](#)
- [Online Safety: What Schools Need to Know](#)
- [Online Safety in Schools: The Essentials](#)

Browse our [Online Safety Resource Pack](#) for more!

