

SecEd

Guide to...

Monitoring for safeguarding risks

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- Using the digital environment to look for the subtle early warning signs of students who are struggling
- What are your statutory obligations?
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GUIDE TO...

Monitoring for safeguarding risks

TEENAGERS WHO use the internet and social networking sites more often are far more likely to report being bullied and to exhibit symptoms of poor mental health.

This is according to a report published last year by the Education Policy Institute – a report that also revealed how the UK's secondary school-aged children are using the internet more often than almost all their international peers. More than a third of UK 15-year-olds can be classed as “extreme internet users”, a proportion surpassed only by Chile.

The statistics are hard to argue with. While only 12 per cent of children who spend very little time on social media websites have symptoms of mental ill-health, that figure rockets to 27 per cent for those who spend three hours or more on such sites each day.

The impact of internet use on students' mental health is just one of the reasons why secondary schools are now under more pressure than ever to keep tabs on how pupils are interacting online. *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, the Department for Education's (DfE) statutory guidance for schools and colleges on safeguarding children, lists many more. These include (but are not limited to) the very serious issues caused by: cyber-bullying, child sexual exploitation, domestic violence, forced marriage, gang membership, radicalisation, gender-based violence, and trafficking.

The guidance is clear in its expectations: “All school and college staff have a responsibility to provide a safe environment in which children can learn. It is essential that children are safeguarded from potentially harmful and inappropriate online material.” It emphasises that

schools need to ensure “appropriate filters and ... monitoring systems are in place”.

Monitoring for risks

The question is, does your school's approach to monitoring for safeguarding purposes come up to scratch? Is your school set up to detect the often subtle signs that something is wrong? Does your monitoring approach constantly update to pick up on emerging behaviours and trends? And what are you risking if it does not?

“First and foremost, if you are in a school which is relying solely on the eyes and ears of teaching staff to detect possible warning signs, and you are not monitoring the digital environment, the risk is that the wellbeing and welfare of the individual pupils is being compromised,” explained Mark Donkersley, managing director of eSafe, a unique monitoring service provider for schools and colleges.

“From a school's perspective, getting safeguarding seriously wrong is a career-limiting move. Schools can get downgraded by Ofsted for poor practice. It doesn't matter how good your results are, or how good your teaching and learning is, the evidence is out there that one or a number of serious safeguarding issues can result in your school being placed in special measures.”

It can be “very difficult” for schools to recover after taking such a reputational hit, he added.

The DfE guidance says that schools must be taking steps to stop pupils from being exposed to “illegal, inappropriate or harmful material”, from being subjected to “harmful online interaction with other users”, and from behaving online in a way

A secondary school with 1,000 pupils can expect at least one serious safeguarding incident per week that requires immediate intervention. If you are missing this, you could be at risk of failing the expected safeguarding standards

that increases the likelihood of, or causes, harm to themselves or others.

The Prevent Duty

And it's not just the DfE that has set out expectations relating to how schools monitor pupils' use of the internet and school devices. The Home Office's Prevent guidance, aimed at identifying people who have or could develop links to extremism, reminds schools that they "should be mindful of their existing duties to forbid political indoctrination", and that Ofsted pays close attention to their "approach to keeping pupils safe from the dangers of radicalisation and extremism".

Mr Donkersley continued: "There's always been a duty of care, a need for schools to look after their pupils as well as their staff, but clearly over the last few years the government has identified, at a more granular level, the extent and scale of the safeguarding challenge that exists – and there is now an expectation that schools have to play their part in the identification of those risks."

Monitoring pupils when they are on school-owned devices, whether they are online or offline, onsite or offsite, is often central to a school's safeguarding strategy. Because of this, it is becoming clearer just how prevalent safeguarding issues are.

According to information gathered by eSafe, which facilitates such monitoring, a secondary school with 1,000 pupils can expect at least one serious safeguarding incident per week that requires immediate intervention (based on data from schools in England and Wales). If you are missing this, you could be at risk of failing the expected safeguarding standards.

Digital markers

Even though students might believe that they are sanitising their behaviour while on school equipment, Mr Donkersley says that pupils still leave behind huge numbers of "digital markers" – behaviours or indicators that can help identify issues.

"It's human nature," he explained, "and the volume of markers which appear in the digital environment within a school or college is enormous. It is an incredibly rich seam of information when you consider that this is not just about seeing what the students are doing online, but also what they're doing in

applications like Microsoft Word, which teenagers will often use to diarise their thoughts and feelings.

"Add this to what is picked up by the eyes and ears of the teachers, and monitoring can provide incredibly valuable insights, allowing schools to plan appropriate interventions."

It turned out that this person was being abused – the parents and school didn't know, the individual hadn't spoken to anyone else, but a very low level marker revealed a serious issue

In one incident described by Mr Donkersley, a secondary school pupil had exchanged messages with another student, ostensibly complaining about the volume of homework received: "It looked, at first glance, as though it was just someone venting their frustration."

However, the phraseology being used was picked up by the detection software as a marker of a potential risk, and the subsequent analysis by our behaviour analysts suggested that this individual was potentially anxious and depressed.

"We escalated this to the school, and they didn't have them on the radar for any problem in that area," Mr Donkersley continued. "They spoke to the parents, who were also not aware of any issues."

The child entered the school's counselling process, and at the first counselling session the individual made an allegation of physical abuse.

This was then referred to the local authority's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH): "It turned out that this person was being abused – the parents and school didn't know, the individual hadn't spoken to anyone else, but a very low level marker revealed a serious issue."

Such low-level indicators can help to identify the huge – and growing – number of issues affecting the wellbeing and welfare of young people that schools

are now expected to be picking up. For more on the kinds of language that monitoring should be looking out for, see the back page of this guide.

Mental health

In addition to those already mentioned, the DfE guidance refers to so-called “honour-based” violence, which encompasses crimes committed to protect or defend the honour of a family or community, including female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

The document also refers to drug use, hate-crime and sexting – all of which the eSafe service is designed to identify. According to Mr Donkersley, however, there is one area that is flagged up more often than all others: “The most prevalent behaviour category we detect and escalate to schools and colleges relates to mental health issues,” he said. “It tends to be twice the next most prevalent category of behaviour in the UK – it far outstrips everything else.”

Picking up on the early indicators that a pupil is struggling is absolutely key to getting to grips with this issue. It is also something that is currently very high on the political agenda with ministers keeping a keen eye trained on how schools are approaching the issue.

For example, the Mental Health Green Paper (December 2017) places a clear focus on the role of schools and recommends that all schools have an on-site mental health lead.

“Early detection is so important. In one case, we thought someone was at risk of self-harm, but the staff didn’t think that this fitted this pupil’s profile and the parents hadn’t said anything.

“But taking the information we had gathered and then following up with a simple check, it was discovered that the pupil concerned had had a couple of innocuous trips to first aid for cuts, which on further investigation confirmed this to be a pupil in early stage self-harm. The follow-up and intervention needs to be conducted in a sensitive and appropriate way, and schools need time to plan that, but the real key to effective safeguarding is the identification of the issue – and the earlier you pick it up the better.”

Conclusion

Ultimately, schools need to be asking themselves if the processes that they have in place for detecting risk indicators is robust. If attention is not paid to the changing nature of threats, and if the software being

used is not responsive to the ways in which pupils interact and talk with each other, then the potential consequences are very serious indeed.

Mr Donkersley said: “From our perspective, the most worrying thing about schools that are not monitoring effectively is the impact this could have on the lives of individual students.

“There is a great opportunity to identify that someone needs support and guidance, and if that is overlooked and missed, then the individual concerned is increasingly at greater risk and in harm’s way.”

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Monitoring: key questions

Key questions schools should ask when reviewing their monitoring provision include:

- Does your monitoring solution include expertise across the full range of potential behaviours?
- Does your system monitor users when they are both connected and not connected to your server – including outside of education hours?
- Can your system monitor static and moving images?
- Is your system’s detection software updated to reflect current and emerging behaviour trends?
- Is your system multilingual and multicultural?
- Does your system allow you to monitor safeguarding issues and the success of your intervention strategies?

Further information

- *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, DfE, last updated September 2016: <http://bit.ly/2bl2Zsm>
- *Prevent Duty: Guidance for UK home nations*, Home Office: <http://bit.ly/1kcoR2s>
- *The Prevent Duty: Departmental advice for schools*, DfE, June 2015: <http://bit.ly/1VgKvCS>
- eSafe: www.esafeglobal.com or email hello@esafeglobal.com

The nuances of language

IMAGINE YOU were looking through an online chat between two students. The conversation is emotional, but does not go beyond anything you would expect from two teenage pupils looking, perhaps, to vent their frustration or seek a bit of peer guidance.

The phrase “I feel better” crops up a few times. On the face of it, this looks like a positive. The person in question is feeling better – that must be a good thing. So you move on, and look at another conversation.

This one is taking place in Cantonese. A translation of the transcript reveals that one pupil is telling the other that they are an idiot, and that she hopes he falls over in the street. This looks like schoolyard banter and should probably be overlooked, right?

Wrong. In both these cases, there is a subtle warning sign that something is not quite right.

In the first incident, the phrase “I feel better” can be an indicator of mental health issues, grooming, self-harm or drug abuse. And while the Cantonese phrase might not seem particularly offensive when translated, it is an indicator of threatening or abusive behaviour, since in the native tongue these words are far more serious.

So how can schools reassure themselves that they are not missing key indicators of online abuse, or red flags that could help them to identify pupils who are at risk?

“Our technology does not have language barriers,” explained Mark Donkersley, managing director of eSafe, which provides a full monitoring service to schools and colleges. “It can read scripts, so if someone is writing in Japanese or Chinese characters, or Urdu, then our detection technology can read that.”

eSafe also employs behaviour analysts with a range of cultural backgrounds to ensure that when potential issues are flagged up by its detection software, a behaviour specialist with a cultural understanding of the language used can examine it to determine whether it is genuine and needs intervention.

“We have access not only to specialists with

the required language skills, but also people who have grown up in a culture,” Mr Donkersley said. “We have people who, for example, know how someone in Poland might speak about sexting, or how someone in South China might be bullying or threatening someone. The words used are often meaningless in English, so it is critical that you have that cultural understanding.”

Understanding the nuance of language is not restricted to incidents in non-English languages. The terms and phrases used in the UK change so frequently, and can be so opaque in their nature, that eSafe is constantly updating its “threat library” – the database of phrases, words and terms that trigger an alert.

Mr Donkersley explained: “We have to be very dynamic. All the behaviour markers that we have, whether in English or any other language, have got to be overhauled on a regular basis because people will use euphemisms and code words to describe or attempt to hide their real behaviour.

“Imagine the number of different words for heroin and cannabis. People in Manchester will be using different terms to those in London or Birmingham. You have to localise it, stay on top of it, and incorporate new phrases and code words into the library.”

This is a process that eSafe takes very seriously and its dedicated Insightlab team works tirelessly to ensure that the threat library is constantly up-to-date, collaborating with external specialist agencies, such as the UK police forces, to achieve this.

“These organisations specialise in all sorts of behaviours, and can articulate to us the sort of language they are hearing which helps us create markers we can then incorporate into our system.”

Without this information source, schools could find it very difficult to keep track of what language is and is not an indicator of risk.

“A lot of these markers have multiple meanings, and over time they change. If you take criminal behaviours, the perpetrators are trying to stay one step ahead of the police, so you have to look beyond the more obvious phrases, because in reality, the language clues we are picking up on are far more subtle.”

Case study: A proactive approach

ST THOMAS More Catholic Academy in Stoke-on-Trent has, like any other secondary school in the country, a safeguarding obligation to its pupils. Also like any other secondary school, it has a range of complex issues with which it must contend on a daily basis.

“We are in the top 20 per cent nationally for students with English as an additional language, we have a religiously diverse student body, and Stoke is the Brexit capital of the world, according to the *Guardian*,” explained headteacher Mark Rayner.

“In the local area there are definitely racial tensions, along with gang activity. Even the things that Donald Trump says on any given day can cause us issues.”

About two years ago, the school decided to appoint eSafe to monitor all activity on its IT devices to strengthen its safeguarding regime. It tracks staff and student use of school devices and can identify warning signs of safeguarding risks.

“The service is about safety, but because of the way it works it is also part of our approach to the Prevent agenda, our bullying and cyber-bullying strategy, our work on gangs, drugs, anti-social behaviour and student mental health as well. It plays a part in all those aspects of our safeguarding agenda and our drive to secure safeguarding excellence.”

In addition to the weekly reports from eSafe showing the number of risk-related incidents, the school also receives instant notifications when potentially illegal or life-threatening activity is detected.

In the case of staff incidents, Mr Rayner receives the reports himself. For students, the school’s safeguarding lead is informed.

Mr Rayner recalls one incident when the system identified a student as being in a vulnerable position. The student hadn’t disclosed this and picking it up quickly allowed the school to be proactive: “We were able to speak to the student and the parent and provide the appropriate support swiftly. Having eSafe meant we could be proactive – there had been a change in mood and the student got that support straight away. Without the instant detection, that wouldn’t have happened so quickly.”

In addition to national and international keywords

and phrases, eSafe allows schools to add their own local watchwords to the detection software. For Mr Rayner, this meant his team had the ability to add local gang names to the database in order to pick up any students who might be involved in gang-related activity or who may be deemed vulnerable to radicalisation.

“As a result, there have been proactive conversations with parents and a number of external agencies like the local gangs unit. That’s pretty fantastic safeguarding in my opinion – it allows us to be proactively responding, rather than dealing with the consequences.”

Having such a thorough approach to the monitoring of online activity has not only helped identify and deal with potential issues within the staff and student body, it is also helping the school to fulfil the expectations of the inspectorate, as acknowledged by Ofsted in May 2017. “Ofsted wants schools to have a culture of safeguarding, rather than just checking our systems from time to time,” he said. “This tool helps us with that holistic accountability, and it really does provide me, as the head, with reassurance.”

According to Mr Rayner, eSafe has contributed to his school’s more robust safeguarding approach: “You can try to do this type of monitoring on your own, but you will likely be picking things up after the event – you are not doing it proactively. Knowing that it is being monitored properly helps me to sleep at night.”



eSafe is a complete outsourced monitoring solution that operates

24/7, 365 days-a-year. It provides a unique combination of intelligent detection software, dynamically maintained threat libraries, and a highly trained team of behaviour analysts to monitor all activity on your IT devices.

Key features of the service include:

- Detects threats in any language.
- Interprets slang and dialect.
- Searches static and moving images.

www.esafeglobal.com