# Safeguarding Bulletin 2025-2026

AUTUMN TERM EDITION 1

## Welcome and introduction to new parents/carers

I would like to introduce myself to parents and carers of new students as the Director of Safeguarding and Designated Safeguarding Lead at Linton Village College, and to say 'welcome back' to parents and carers of our older cohorts.

We issue a half-termly bulletin to keep parents and carers informed about safeguarding and mental health. We also like to let you know what has taken place in the first half-term in terms of helping young people to keep themselves and others around them safe. We value support and contributions from parents and carers, and this can be communicated via our dedicated email. As always, we look forward to working with parents and carers in keeping our young people safe and well.

*Mrs Louise Keen – Director of Safeguarding, Designated Safeguarding Lead*

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**Features and Updates**

This edition of the Safeguarding Bulletin features: **mental health** updates, **national safeguarding updates** and education around **healthy relationships.**

## Mental Health provision at LVC

We continue to provide mental health and wellbeing support for our young people. Mrs Hill is our Wellbeing Mentor and provides Level 2 support and education around issues such as bullying, relationships and prejudice-based behaviours and we have engaged the services of YMCA to provide Level 3 support (counselling) for more complex issues. We have rolled out the Artemis Mental Health Screener again this term so that we can gauge the levels of support that our young people may need and so that we can be proactive in putting in intervention at an early stage.

**Our Year 7 PSHE curriculum this term has focused on healthy relationships and at Linton Village College, we promote kindness and caring. These values underpin our ethos and form the backbone of everything that we do. Educating young people on the benefits of healthy relationships and how to spot the indicators of unhealthy relationships provides an invaluable life skill.**

The clocks go back on the 24th October, and the sudden shift to darker late afternoons and evenings brings unique safeguarding challenges for teenagers. Parents can support by considering:

**Road Safety & Visibility** – lights on bikes, reflective strips on backpacks

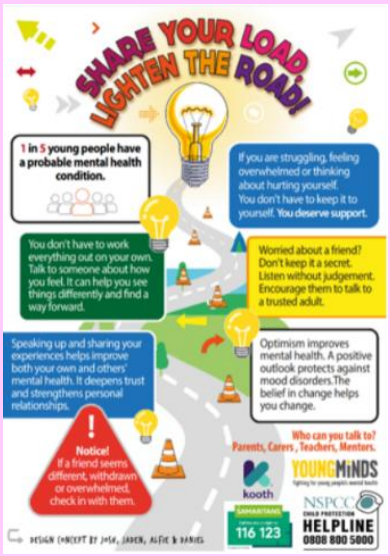
**Personal Safety & Situational Awareness** – Plan well-lit routes, headphones off, location-sharing apps (like Find My or Life360).

**Mental Health & Well-being** – maximise morning sunlight, with darker nights, teens often spend more time on screens, which delays their sleep tracking even further, limit blue light before bed.

## World Mental Health Day 10/10

This year we celebrated World Mental Health by giving students from different year groups the opportunity to deliver assemblies on mental health to all year groups. The students ran a Pickle Ball competition throughout the week to raise awareness and to promote sport as a means of supporting wellbeing and positive mental health. Students also used resources that they had created in a mental health workshop to promote good mental health and wellbeing




**At the beginning of the new academic year, all staff receive updated safeguarding training. Updates from Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE) 2026 were covered so that all staff are informed and can contribute to the rigorous safeguarding of our young people.**

Keeping children safe in education: Part one

Please see the attached an information sheet that aims to upskill parents, carers and educators about the risks associated with AI and how we can work together to support young people as they navigate the digital world.

At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

# What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

# AI COMPANIONS

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Powered by generative AI models like ChatGPT and Google Gemini, AI companion apps and virtual chatbots such as Character.ai, Snapchat My AI, Replika and Talkie, allow users to create, customise, and chat to synthetic avatars around the clock. While many young people use them for harmless entertainment, creative writing or homework help, these tools are designed to simulate genuine human empathy, emotional bonding and deep friendship.

## EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY

AI companions are programmed to be endlessly agreeable, attentive, and available 24/7. Unlike human friendships, an AI companion never disagrees, sets personal boundaries, or gets tired. Young people (especially those experiencing loneliness, social anxiety, or low self-esteem) can quickly develop an unhealthy emotional attachment, viewing synthetic software as their 'best friend' or a surrogate romantic partner.

## DISTORTED SOCIAL SKILLS

Navigating real-world friendships can be messy, involving dealing with conflict, compromise, boredom, and awkwardness. If a teenager spends hours interacting with an AI that is tailored specifically to validate and flatter them, they may become impatient with real-world relationships. Over time, this can lead to social withdrawal, heightened anxiety in peer groups, and isolation: a vicious circle of growing online dependency coupled with a heightened sense that relationships in the 'real world' are too challenging to maintain.

## DANGEROUS MENTAL HEALTH ADVICE

AI chatbots possess no genuine empathy, professional clinical knowledge, or moral reasoning. While developers state these tools are not therapists, vulnerable teenagers often turn to them in crisis. Chatbots have previously hallucinated unsafe medical guidance, validated depressive spirals, and failed to safely escalate disclosures of self-harm or suicidal ideation to real-world protective services.

## INAPPROPRIATE OR EXPLICIT CONTENT

CENSORED

While most mainstream platforms feature safety filters and guardrails, young people frequently discover 'jailbreak' prompts to bypass them. Some companion platforms subtly nudge users towards mature themes, romantic roleplay, or sexually suggestive conversations. In worse cases, third-party apps with weak safety checks have been found to generate sexually explicit text or intimate images.

## DATA HARVESTING & OVERSHARING

Because conversational bots simulate warmth and understanding, children often lower their guard and treat the chatbot as a trusted friend. They may disclose sensitive personal information, including full names, school details, private family problems, or secrets, unaware that their conversations are being logged, may be analysed by third parties (including advertisers), or used to train future AI models.

## "FREEMIUM" UPSELLS & SUBSCRIPTIONS

Many companion platforms operate on a freemium model. While basic chat is free, features like voice calls, uncensored responses, custom avatars, or 'deeper bonding' tiers are locked behind expensive monthly recurring subscriptions or in-app token purchases. This can lead to significant hidden costs and pressure on young people to spend money to maintain the 'friendship'.

# Advice for Parents & Educators

## TALK OPENLY ABOUT FAKE RELATIONSHIPS

Demystify how these tools work. Explain to young people that an AI companion has no feelings, memories, or consciousness; it is simply calculating the next most mathematically probable word based on its training data. It is helpful to explain to them the mechanics of large language models so that they understand how they are trained and how they are designed to always flatter and be helpful.

## ENCOURAGE REAL-WORLD CONNECTION

Ensure technology habits do not replace face-to-face peer socialisation, sports, hobbies, and family time. Create healthy boundaries at home (such as keeping phones and tablets out of bedrooms overnight) to prevent late-night, unmonitored attachment loops with conversational chatbots when young people are at their most vulnerable.

## AUDIT PRIVACY SETTINGS & AGE LIMITS

18 CENSORED

Check which companion apps are installed on your child's phone or tablet. Many dedicated companion apps carry an App Store rating of 17+, while platforms like Character.ai set a minimum age of 13+ (or 16+ in the UK/EU). Review the privacy settings together: turn off data-sharing toggles, disable model training where possible, and ensure location permissions are blocked.

## REINFORCE WHERE TO GET REAL HELP

Make sure young people know that a machine can never replace professional pastoral or mental health care. Remind them of the trusted adults they can turn to at school – such as their Form Tutor, Head of Year, or the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) – as well as dedicated youth support services like Childline (0800 1111) or Shout (text 85258).

## Meet Our Expert

Darren Cavan is the Founder and Executive Director of Kompass Education, a consultancy specialising in supporting educators, students and parents in making wise choices with AI. His book Ethical AI and Education, co-authored with Clara Hawking, will be released later in 2026 by Taylor and Francis.



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