

Guardians UK

Online Safety Policy

Introduction

This policy is based on the key government document Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2024 and supported by other guidance produced by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Local Safeguarding Partnerships (LSPs) in the areas pertinent to Guardians UK operations. This policy is to be read in conjunction with the Guardians UK Child Protection and Safeguarding policy alongside other relevant policies.

It is important to be aware that COVID-19 has increased screen time further for most young people and therefore those caring for young people need to understand more than ever the risks that are present online. International students are extremely vulnerable for a number of reasons and when linked to culture shock they need guidance and support keeping safe. Risks include over-use, exposure to harmful content, online abuse such as bullying and grooming into criminal activity. Whilst we are in loco parentis, it is increasingly important that we are able to spot the signs and indicators.

Online Safety

The use of technology has become a significant component in many safeguarding issues. Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE); Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE); radicalisation; sexual predation; sexting; technology often provides the platform that facilitates harm. An effective approach to online safety empowers Guardians UK to protect and educate its students and staff in their use of technology and establishes mechanisms to identify, intervene in, and escalate any incident where appropriate.

The type of issues classified within online safety is considerable, but can be categorised into three areas of risk:

- **content:** being exposed to illegal, inappropriate or harmful material; for example pornography, fake news, racist or radical and extremist views;
- **contact:** being subjected to harmful online interaction with other users; for example commercial advertising as well as adults posing as children or young adults; and
- **conduct:** personal online behaviour that increases the likelihood of, or causes, harm; for example, making, sending and receiving explicit images, or online bullying.

Sharing of nude and semi-nude images and/or videos

More and more children are engaging or being affected by the sharing of indecent images and videos or 'sexting'. With most young people having access to phones and social media accounts, it is becoming easier for them to send and receive explicit messages and images.

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Sexting means sending sexually explicit messages and/or suggestive images, such as nudes. This can be done via any messaging service, including emails and social media. Therefore, they can be sent or received via several electronic devices such as smart phones, computers and tablets.

If a child is under the age of 18, it is illegal for them to take a nude photo of themselves or a friend, as well as distribute them. Even though the age of sexual consent is 16, the Protection of Children Act means it is against the law for a child to share a sexual image, even if it is with someone who is under the age of 18.

Images covered under the law include, but are not limited to, naked pictures, topless photos of girls, any sex acts or sexual images in underwear. If it is found that a child under the age of 18 is in possession of any of these, has been sending them or taking these types of photos, the police can record it as a crime.

Training and Updates

Guardians UK staff are trained in all aspects of Safeguarding including Online Safety and Sexting as part of their induction programme. They also receive and work through the Staff Code of Conduct which supports safer online working practices and provides guidelines for the use of social media and images. In her role as DSL, Helen Lewis will distribute regular updates via email on this topic from the NSPCC and other affiliated organisations to all staff and ensure that they maintain their understanding of online safety through regular refresher training courses.

Host families will receive similar advice and support through the Host Family Handbook as well as regular updates from the DSL and their Regional Guardian. Host families are crucial when it comes to ensuring young people use their mobile devices and the internet within the guidelines established in the Host Family handbook and are also on the front line for young people when they may be vulnerable to inappropriate online activity and wish to pass on information.

Guardians UK drivers will be similarly trained and updated in safer online issues so if an incident were to arise whilst the young person is in transit they would know the procedure to follow.

Students are inducted into the importance of safer online activity on receipt of their Student Handbook and will discuss the importance of this with their Regional Guardian at their initial meetings. They also understand and agree to Guardians UK Student Behaviour guidelines which clearly explain the importance of safer online activity and what to do if they are worried about anything online. Within their schools, the students will also receive similar information and advice on how to keep themselves safe online and who to talk to if they have a problem or concern. Guardians UK online safety advice supports the work done in schools.

How does Guardians UK protect children?

Guardians UK staff need to ensure that realistic measures are put in place to ensure that young people's access to online activity is appropriate. The Host Family handbook outlines what can be done to control the young person's use of the internet and is discussed in greater depth by the Regional Guardian when visiting the host family. For example host families are to use privacy settings, parental controls and internet safety features provided by all main internet service providers. Host families also need to ensure appropriate filters and monitoring systems are in place.

The extent to which these controls are put in place are clearly dependent upon the age of the young person in their care and how often they are accessing the internet.

In respect to mobile phones and tablet usage, host families need to be aware of possible concerns over access to public wifi, the taking and sending of pictures and location tracking. On social networking sites it is important that host families check that young people know how to report offensive posts, how to keep their settings private and how to block someone.

Students are appropriately inducted and understand the need to follow sensible 'house rules' when staying with a host family, understand the importance of sharing any concerns they might have with the host families and understand the consequences of not following online safety guidelines.

If host families need any further guidance on issues relating to safer online activity they are welcome to discuss matters with the Regional Guardian in the first instance, Guardians UK DSL and there are also a number of online support websites for parents and carers listed at the end of this policy document.

It is important that Guardians UK staff develop an open and trusting relationship with the child in their care so that the child feels able and confident to react appropriately if they are, for example, sent any unwanted images or messages which can be distressing, especially for younger children. If the child knows they have support from an adult who is looking after them, they are more likely to ask questions and for advice.

Similarly, Guardians UK staff need to know what signs to look for if they suspect a child is experiencing online abuse. The NSPCC has produced this list of possible signs although it must be remembered these are not exhaustive:

- being upset after using the internet or phone;
- having more than one phone and responding differently to activity on each one;
- being unwilling to talk or secretive about their online activity;
- significantly changing the amount of time they spend on online activities;
- changing mood and appearing upset or angry after being on their online gadgets;
- not wanting to return to school or meet up with friends
- avoiding social situations
- sleeping problems
- lowering of self esteem

If children are found to have been practising unsafe online activities or sexting whilst in the care of Guardians UK either during transits or during homestay visits, Guardians UK staff need to know what steps to take.

Further Support

The following websites provide useful additional information and support for staff and carers to keep children safe online:

www.thinkuknow.co.uk - an education programme from CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection), a UK organisation which protects children both online and offline

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/articles/what-is-the-internet-of-things-iot> - explains what is meant by the 'Internet of Things' and how Host Families in particular can use these devices safely with hosted children

www.internetmatters.org - help for parents keep their children safe online

[Parent Zone | At the heart of digital family life](#) - support for digital family life

www.nspcc.org.uk - advice for schools and young people

www.net-aware.org.uk - NSPCC advice for parents

Procedures

Guidance on dealing with incidents of inappropriate online activity including sexting in educational settings has been issued by the government, which means that there is a process in place for dealing with any cases. The Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2024 guidance means any cases of inappropriate online activity or sexting must be reported to a designated member of staff, who will then lead an investigation. If a member of Guardians UK staff finds out that a child has been involved in sending nude or semi-nude images and/or videos they must inform the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) helen.lewis@guardiansuk.com or phone the Guardians UK24/7 emergency number 01823 703199 (ext. 1 during out of office hours) as soon as possible.

The DSL or DDSL will then follow the appropriate course of action as per the Guardians UK Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, and outlined on the following page:

Procedure followed by Guardians UK in response to a disclosure: