

ICS Safeguarding Newsletter 19

The Power of Connection (In person and online) — and what to watch for when things go wrong

Connection is one of the strongest protective factors in a child or teenager's life. When young people feel known, liked, and understood - by family, friends, and trusted adults - they cope better with stress, take fewer risky decisions, and are more likely to speak up early when something feels 'off'.

In an international school community like ours, connection matters even more. Many students move countries, switch friendship groups, and navigate multiple cultures and languages. Their friendships may be a mix of in-person time at school and online time after school - sometimes with peers in other countries and time zones. The aim isn't to fear connection online or romanticise connection offline; it's to help children build *healthy* relationships in both spaces and to ensure adults recognise the signs when something starts to go wrong.

This article is in two parts:

1. how parents can strengthen connection (offline and online), and
2. what to look out for if peer issues, bullying, or online risk begins to appear.

Why connection protects children and teens

Connection builds emotional safety

When a child experiences consistent warmth, attention, and acceptance, they are more likely to:

- talk honestly about their day
- manage conflict without panic or shame
- ask for help before a situation escalates
- recover faster when something upsetting happens

For teens especially, peer connection is developmentally important. Friendships help them practise independence, identity, humour, loyalty, and boundaries. It's normal for peers to matter - a lot. The safeguarding question is: ***is this connection supportive and safe, or is it controlling, humiliating, secretive, or risky?***

Connection reduces the power of secrecy

Most safeguarding concerns grow in the dark. When children believe they will be blamed, punished, or have their phone 'taken forever', they may hide problems. When home is a place of calm curiosity ('I'm here - tell me'), children come forward sooner.

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Building healthy connection offline

You don't need hours of 'quality time'. Small, repeated moments are powerful.

Try 'micro-connection' habits

- The 10-minute check-in: ten minutes of undistracted attention daily (no phone in your hand).
- Car conversations: some children talk best side-by-side, not face-to-face.
- Food moments: a snack after school, breakfast together, or tea at night.
- Two questions that work:
 - "Who did you spend time with today?"
 - "Was anything tricky or awkward today?"

Help children practise friendship skills

Many peer issues start with normal misunderstandings - especially across cultures and languages. You can quietly coach:

- how to apologise
- how to disagree without insulting
- how to leave a group kindly
- how to include others

With teens, you might ask:

- "How do you feel when you're with that group?"
- "Do you feel you can be yourself?"
- "Do you ever feel pressured to do things you don't want to do?"

Building healthy connection online (without panic)

Online spaces can be genuinely positive: creativity, humour, belonging, shared interests, and maintaining friendships beyond school. The goal is to teach *digital relationship wisdom* - not just 'screen rules'.

Aim for guidance over surveillance

A child who feels constantly monitored may simply become more secretive. Instead:

- make online life a normal topic, like school or sport
- keep devices out of bedrooms overnight where possible (sleep is protective)
- agree family expectations: kindness, privacy, no sharing of images, and what to do if something feels wrong
- ensure accounts are age-appropriate and privacy settings are strong

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Teach these 'three online safety truths'

1. **People are not always who they say they are.**
2. **Screens intensify emotions.** Small comments can feel huge.
3. **The internet rewards extremes.** Drama spreads faster than calm.

The 'If it happens, you won't be in trouble' promise

Say it clearly and repeat it:

- "If you see something upsetting, if someone asks you for pictures, if a friend is being cruel, or if you make a mistake - tell me. We'll handle it together."

That sentence reduces fear and increases reporting. It's one of the simplest safeguarding tools parents have.

When things go wrong: peer issues online and offline

Peer problems often move between school corridors and group chats. A falling out at lunch becomes a screenshot war at 10pm. A joke in a game chat becomes a rumour by morning. Watch for **patterns**, not one-off bad days.

What parents might see (Primary)

Children may:

- suddenly avoid school, clubs, or certain classmates
- complain of tummy aches or headaches (especially mornings)
- become tearful, clingy, or unusually angry after device use
- stop mentioning a friend they used to love
- talk about being left out, not invited, or 'everyone is laughing'
- show changes in sleep (nightmares, bedtime resistance)

Primary online issues often involve:

- unkind voice notes or comments during games
- copying/ excluding on shared platforms
- older siblings' or cousins' group chats spilling over
- 'dares' or prank challenges

What parents might see (Secondary)

Teens may:

- become secretive, defensive, or panicked if a phone is mentioned
- experience sudden mood swings after messages

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- withdraw from family, stop eating with others, or isolate in their room
- show a drop in grades or motivation
- become unusually anxious about appearance or reputation
- switch accounts, delete messages, or create 'finstas'/ alternative profiles
- become fixated on checking notifications (hypervigilance)

Secondary online issues may include:

- group chat pile-ons
- rumours, memes, and edited images
- harassment through anonymous accounts
- pressure to share images or personal information
- 'friendship control' (who you can talk to, what you can post)

Peer conflict vs bullying — a quick guide

- **Conflict:** both feel upset; there is some balance of power; it can be resolved with support and repair.
- **Bullying:** repeated, intentional harm with a power imbalance (popularity, age, strength, group size, or online reach).

If your child seems consistently fearful, powerless, or targeted, treat it as bullying and seek support early.

'Strangers' and online grooming: what to look out for

Most online harm starts with *relationship-building*, not threats. A stranger may begin as a 'friend' in a game, a follower who compliments, or someone who seems to 'get them'.

Potential warning signs

- sudden new online 'friend' they won't talk about
- receiving gifts (in-game items, phone credit, money)
- being asked to move to a different platform (more private)
- secrecy: "Don't tell your parents - they won't understand"
- sexualised talk, requests for images, or 'jokes' that push boundaries
- your child seems simultaneously excited and anxious after messaging
- late-night messaging, sleep disruption, or unusual clinginess

Key message for young people

Safe adults never ask children for sexual content, secrecy, or private images.

If anyone does: block, report, and tell a trusted adult immediately.

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What parents can do immediately if you're worried

1) Regulate first, investigate second

If you go in angry, a child may shut down. Start with:

- "I'm really glad you told me."
- "You're not in trouble."
- "We'll sort this together."

2) Get the facts gently. Try:

- "Show me what happened."
- "When did it start?"
- "Who else knows?"
- "What do you want to happen next?"

3) Preserve evidence. If it's online:

- screenshot messages/usernames
 - keep links and dates
 - don't respond impulsively in the group chat
- Evidence helps school or platforms act effectively.

4) Use practical safety steps

- block/ report accounts
- tighten privacy settings
- pause certain apps temporarily (frame it as support, not punishment)
- move devices out of bedrooms overnight
- consider 'open door' device use in shared spaces for a while

5) Tell school early

If peers are involved, school can help with supervision, mediation, restorative work, and boundaries, *but we can only help if we know*. Early reporting prevents escalation.

How parents can strengthen connection this week (a simple challenge)

Try one of these 'connection challenges' with your child/teen:

- **Primary:** 'Teach me your game' night — they show you how it works and who they play with.

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- **Secondary:** 'Two highs and one hard' — each person shares two good things and one difficult moment from the day.
- **For everyone:** 'Phone-free 20' — 20 minutes together daily, devices away, just talking or doing something small.

Connection isn't a one-time event; it's the steady message:

'You matter to me. I'm here. Nothing is too big to tell me'.

That message, repeated over time, is one of the strongest safeguards we can offer.

If you are concerned

If you have a worry about your child's safety or wellbeing (online or offline), please contact the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL): k.honey@ics.edu.jo

If a situation feels urgent or your child is at immediate risk, seek immediate help through local emergency services.

Kathryn Honey

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