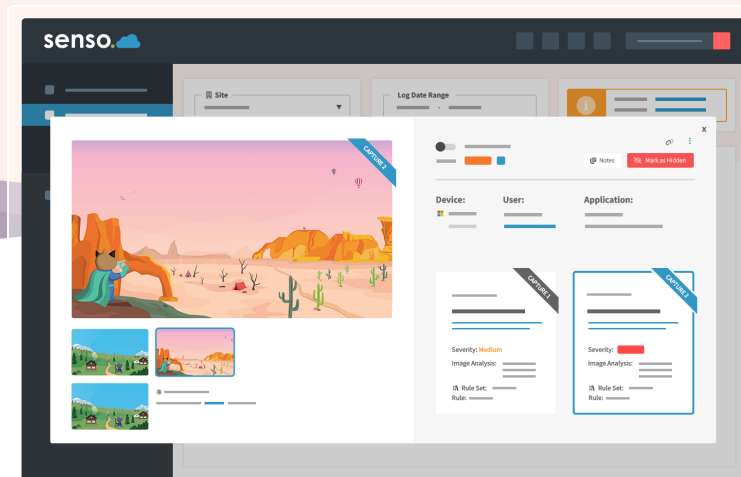


Spotlight on Safeguarding Emerging Safeguarding Trends & How Linguistic Research Helps Schools Identify Risks Early

Safeguarding risks do not exist in isolation. They are shaped by a combination of ongoing behaviours and real-time influences, including online trends, emerging technologies, and current events.

As the online world continues to shift at pace, the behaviours we see through our filtering and monitoring systems offer valuable insight into the challenges children and young people are navigating.

Many of the safeguarding concerns schools are facing do not appear suddenly. Instead, they emerge gradually through patterns of searches, language, and online interactions. Insights from Senso's monitoring and Assisted Monitoring Service reveal several recurring safeguarding themes emerging across schools.



Safeguarding Trends Emerging in Schools

1. Mental Health and Wellbeing Concerns

A high volume of captures are linked to low self-esteem, emotional distress, and mental health struggles. Some pupils are searching for ways to cope with difficult feelings, while others are expressing self-harm or suicidal thoughts. A worrying pattern is the use of AI tools or search engines to seek harmful information, sometimes framed as “research” to bypass safeguards.

In some cases, emotional distress appears to be influenced by exposure to real-world events or widely shared online content, which can amplify anxiety and emotional response.

2. Drugs and Substance Misuse

Searches relating to alcohol, drugs, and overdose continue to appear across multiple schools. Many pupils are looking up drug classifications, legal consequences, or signs of drug use, while others are seeking information that suggests risk-taking or unsafe experimentation.

3. Manosphere and Harmful Online Influences

There has been a noticeable rise in searches linked to the “manosphere” - online communities that promote extreme or harmful views around masculinity. This includes content associated with

misogyny, men's rights activism, incel culture, and influencers who normalise unhealthy attitudes. Some pupils are also engaging with terminology linked to appearance-based pressure and self-criticism.

4. Online Shopping Risks

Platforms such as Vinted, eBay, and Amazon are increasingly being used by pupils, sometimes to search for unsafe or inappropriate items. We've also seen examples of aggressive or threatening messages within online marketplace chats.

5. Chat Functions and Gaming Communities

Chat features within games and online platforms continue to be used for bullying, discriminatory language, or sharing adult content. Many games that appear harmless at first glance link to wider online communities, including Discord servers. Some popular games also contain violent or horror-based themes that may not be age appropriate.

Some interactions within these environments are influenced by violent or trending online content, particularly following widely shared news stories or viral moments, which can shape how pupils communicate and engage with others.

6. AI Companions & Chatbots

AI chatbot misuse is a rapidly evolving safeguarding concern. With students interacting with AI characters or strangers online. Conversations can quickly shift into inappropriate or explicit territory, particularly when users deliberately prompt responses using specific keywords.

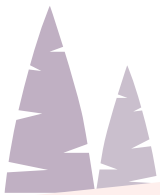
AI tools are also being used to explore or discuss topics influenced by current events or emerging online narratives, sometimes without a clear understanding of the potential risks or implications.

These trends remind us that online behaviour is often a window into how children are feeling, coping, and connecting with the world around them.

By using monitoring insights effectively, strengthening staff awareness, and maintaining open communication with pupils and families, schools can respond early and provide the support young people need. However, identifying these risks early requires more than simply monitoring activity alone.

Monitoring activity provides important signals, but understanding emerging safeguarding risks requires analysing the language students use online.

This linguistic insight plays a key role in how Senso identifies new patterns of concern.



How Linguistic Analysis Helps Reveal Emerging Safeguarding Risks

At Senso, we use corpus linguistics to analyse large datasets of real-world language. This allows us to uncover emerging keywords and understand how safeguarding concerns are actually being expressed in searches, messages, and online conversations.

Through this analysis we can:

1. Identify how safeguarding concerns are expressed in real life.

Linguistic analysis helps us understand how young people actually talk about sensitive issues such as bullying, self-harm, or harmful online influences.

This ensures the language used within our safeguarding libraries reflects the terminology students themselves are using online today.

2. Identify words and phrases that don't at first glance, appear to indicate safeguarding concerns.

Some words or phrases may not immediately appear to signal a safeguarding concern. However, analysing their context can reveal subtle expressions that indicate a student may be in the early stages of distress.

Identifying these early signals allows schools to intervene sooner and provide appropriate support before concerns escalate.

3. Continuously evolve safeguarding detection

Insights from our Assisted Monitoring Service helps guide our ongoing linguistic research enabling us to refine our keyword libraries so that schools are alerted to new risks as language is evolving.

By combining real-world monitoring insight with ongoing linguistic research, we can continuously improve the services and support we give to schools – enabling them to focus on what really matters.

Putting Linguistic Research into Practice

Our in-house linguist, Dr Charlotte-Rose Kennedy, regularly analyses datasets of online language about safeguarding concerns that have been identified through our Assisted Monitoring Service.

One recent rapidly evolving trend is the misuse of AI chatbots and the addictive behaviours associated with them.

Dr Charlotte-Rose Kennedy analysed a 284,833-word dataset of forum posts written by individuals discussing attempts to reduce or quit AI chatbot use.

By examining how people used the phrase “I feel”, the research revealed important insights into the motivations, experiences and emotional impacts associated with AI chatbot use.

Three clear themes emerged from the dataset:

- ✓ Why people turn to AI chatbots
- ✓ The negative consequences of chatbot addiction
- ✓ The challenges people face when trying to stop using them



Why People Turn to AI Chatbots

One of the clearest themes in the dataset was that many people turn to AI chatbots to fulfil social and emotional needs that feel unmet in real life.

Users frequently described feelings of loneliness, isolation, or a desire for companionship. Others described using chatbots as a way to cope with difficult emotions or escape from real-world pressures.

While exact extracts from the dataset are not included in this article to protect the anonymity of the forum posters, examples from the dataset included phrases similar to:

“I have nobody to talk to and I feel so alone”
“I feel safe and loved when I'm with them”
“When I feel depressed, I use it to escape reality”

These findings provide valuable insight into why AI companions can become appealing, particularly for young people who may already be experiencing loneliness or emotional distress.

Understanding these motivations can help schools recognise when the use of AI tools may be linked to underlying wellbeing concerns that require support.

The Negative Impact

The research also highlighted the negative consequences associated with excessive chatbot use. Many users expressed feelings of shame, declining mental wellbeing, and a sense that they were unable to stop using the technology.

Some users also described experiencing declining cognitive engagement, including difficulties concentrating, writing, or maintaining meaningful real-world relationships.

Challenges When Trying to Stop

Another theme that emerged was the difficulty people experience when trying to stop using AI chatbots.

Because many users had formed emotional attachments to the technology, attempts to quit often produced feelings similar to losing real-life friends.

Examples from the data alluded to missing friends, feeling lonely, and having urges to return to the app.

Some users also described symptoms such as mental exhaustion, low motivation, and depression during attempts to stop using the platforms.

Why This Research Matters for Safeguarding

Research like this helps us identify why people engage with AI chatbots and how those relationships can develop over time. By identifying the language patterns associated with these behaviours, we can continue refining the safeguarding libraries used within Senso's monitoring and filtering tools.

This allows schools to be alerted when language patterns start to suggest a student may be experiencing distress, isolation, or developing unhealthy relationships with technology - enabling earlier intervention and support.

Curious about our Safeguarding Solutions?

Our online safety solutions help spot early warning signs and protect students online. Find out more [here](#).