

## How do secondary schools teach about social media, algorithmic recommendations and harmful content?

Research Briefing – June 2026

Digital and media literacy is a fundamental life skill, one that can not only inoculate young people from harm, but prepare them to thrive in the digital and AI economy of tomorrow.

Algorithmic literacy is particularly vital, with algorithmic recommendations playing a central role in exposing young people to online risks, from misinformation and conspiracies to suicide and self-harm material.<sup>1,2</sup>

However, new research by MRF and the University of Bristol highlights significant gaps in how secondary schools currently support children to safely navigate social media.

- Only two fifths (42%) of staff who teach about social media report good coverage of topics relating to algorithms and content recommendation, considerably lower than topics like bullying (86%) relationships (77%) and online identity (73%).
- The role of AI on social media is similarly poorly addressed, with only 46% of staff reporting good coverage.
- Many teachers lack confidence covering these vital topics, with less than a third of staff confident teaching young people about algorithms (32%) and AI (27%).
- Overall, very little curriculum time is dedicated to social media literacy, with provision dropping off from Year 10 onwards. Many staff have also had little or no training.

Schools also appear unprepared for imminent changes to the RSHE curriculum, with many staff lacking the confidence to safely address online suicide and self-harm content.

- Over a third (34%) of staff feel that they would be slightly or not at all confident talking about suicide or self-harm content with students.

### About the research

In winter 2025, Molly Rose Foundation and The University of Bristol<sup>3</sup> conducted an exploratory survey to understand how English secondary schools currently support children to navigate different areas of social media literacy<sup>4</sup> and types of harmful online content. A self-selecting sample of 133 staff took part across a range of leadership, teaching and pastoral roles. Most taught, supported or led PSHE (56%), citizenship (20%) or computing (23%).

1 MRF (2026) Children's exposure to suicide, self-harm, depression and eating disorder content on social media: wave 2 findings.

2 DSIT Committee (2025) Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms.

3 Led by Dr Lizzy Winstone, Bristol Medical School.

4 Social media literacy refers to the skills, knowledge and attitudes to use social media effectively, safely and responsibly.

## Results

### 1. Many schools offer limited support around algorithms and AI compared to other areas of social media literacy

Our analysis identifies significant gaps in how many secondary schools support young people to navigate algorithmically recommended content on social media.

**Only two fifths (42%) of staff who taught about social media felt topics relating to algorithms and content recommendation had good or comprehensive coverage in their lessons or other activities, with most (54%) reporting minimal or basic coverage.**<sup>5</sup>

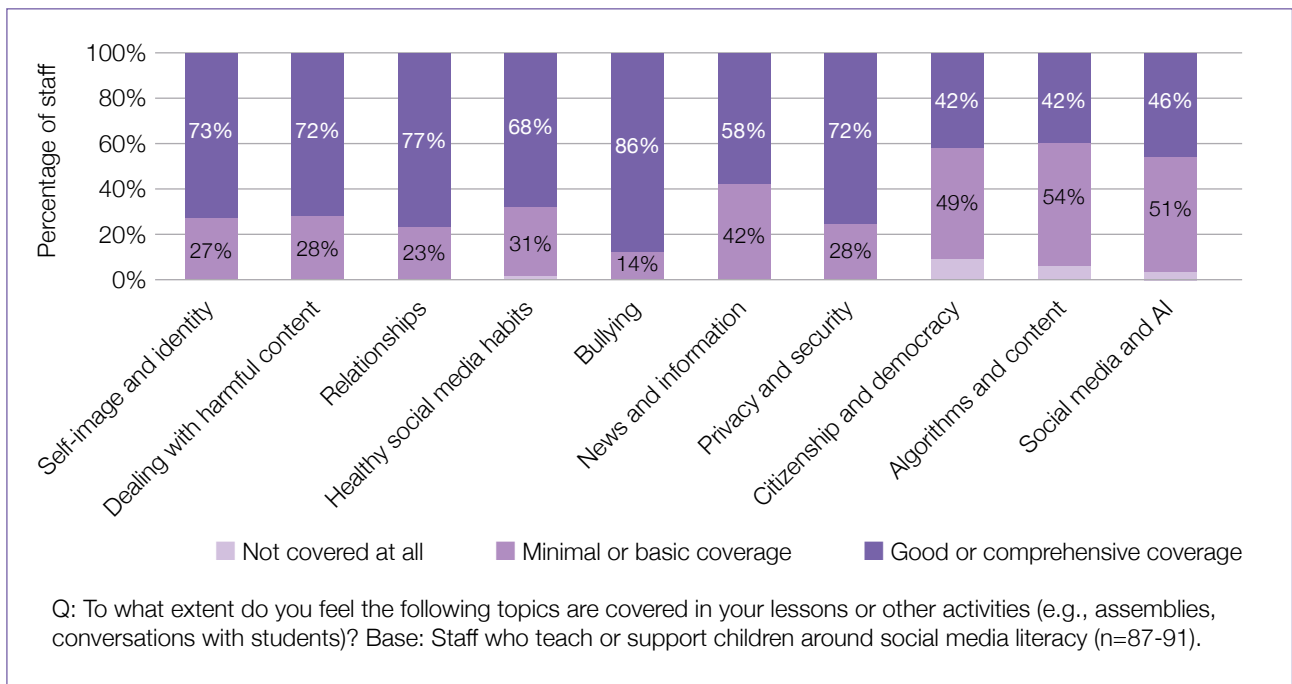
In contrast, a significant majority reported strong coverage of topics relating to bullying (86%), relationships (77%), and self-image and identity (73%).

**Staff were also less likely to report strong coverage of topics relating to AI on social media (46% good or comprehensive coverage),** as well as citizenship and democracy (42%).

Schools' limited emphasis on algorithmic literacy does not reflect staff priorities. Almost all (92%) considered it very or extremely important for students to understand how content recommender algorithms work.

Figure 1 shows reported coverage across different areas of social media literacy. Given the exploratory nature of this survey and a self-selecting sample likely to comprise staff with a greater interest in social media, these findings are likely to overestimate practice at the national level.

**Figure 1: Reported coverage of social media literacy topics in lessons and other activities**



<sup>5</sup> Based on responses from staff who either led the relevant curriculum or taught/supported these topics through lessons or other school activities.

## 2. Many staff lack the confidence to address algorithmic recommendations and AI with young people

Many staff also have limited confidence addressing these vital topics with young people. **Less than a third (32%) of those who taught about social media felt very or extremely confident teaching about recommender algorithms, with a significant proportion (29%) feeling slightly or not at all confident.**

This may be linked to staff's own understanding of algorithmic systems. Only one in five (22%) felt very or extremely confident in their understanding of how content recommender systems work.

Staff also lacked confidence addressing AI on social media (27% high confidence) and citizenship and democracy (34% high confidence). In contrast, almost two-thirds (64%) reported high levels of confidence talking about bullying on social media, with only 7% lacking confidence.

**For all topics, higher levels of confidence were associated with stronger coverage.** This suggests that schools with the resources and capacity to train and build their staff's confidence are better positioned to provide comprehensive social media literacy education, something likely contributing to uneven provision across the country.

## 3. Social media literacy competes for time in a crowded curriculum, with provision dropping off as children get older

Almost all (96%) staff felt it was very or extremely important for students to learn about the risks and opportunities of social media.

However, many schools currently dedicate very limited time to supporting children around social media literacy.

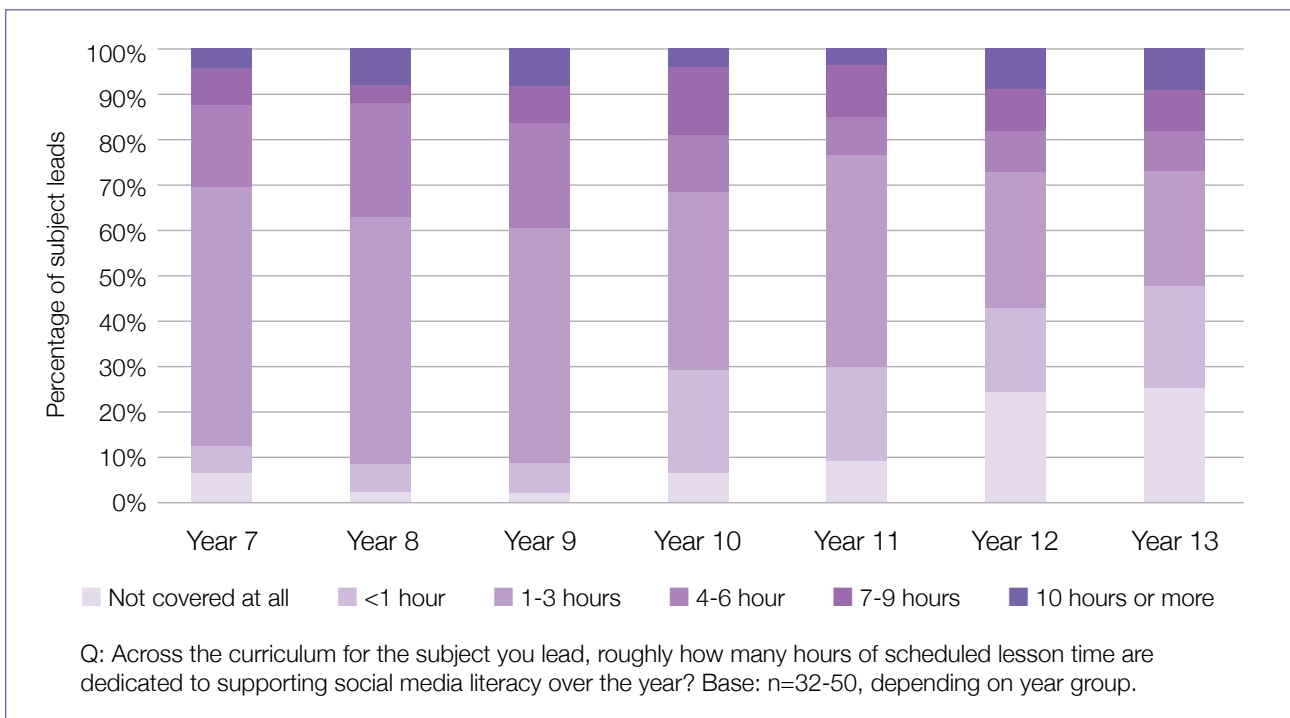
**Across the subjects represented in our survey, subject leads most commonly reported dedicating 1–3 hours of scheduled curriculum time per year to social media literacy (25–56%, depending on the year group).** Fewer than one in ten reported 10 hours or more of curriculum time.

**Teaching about social media is also highest in the early years of secondary school, peaking in Year 9 and declining from Year 10 onwards.** These findings suggest that scheduled curriculum time falls from children's early teens, despite evidence that online risks become increasingly complex during later adolescence.

Figure 2 shows the amount of curriculum time that subject leads estimate is dedicated to social media literacy for each year group. The overall total time is likely to be higher as social media literacy is covered in multiple subjects and non-curriculum activities (e.g. form time, assemblies).

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**Figure 2: Hours of curriculum time dedicated to social media literacy per year in relevant subjects**



#### 4. Many staff lack training on how to teach about social media, and find it difficult to identify relevant resources

Most staff had little training around how to support young people to safely navigate social media.

**Only one in ten (11%) reported having ‘lots’ of training or continuing professional development focused on social media literacy**, over half (56%) had had some, while a third (33%) had not had any training at all.

There were similar gaps in staff’s ability to identify resources to support their teaching, with **over a third (36%) finding it hard to identify relevant resources**, compared to three in ten (29%) who found it easy. When asked about what resources they would find most useful, staff expressed a preference for ready-made materials they could use with students, including lesson plans and PowerPoint decks.

#### 5. Schools need additional support to implement upcoming changes to the RSE Curriculum, with many staff lacking confidence to address certain forms of harmful content

From September 2026, new Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance in England will require secondary schools to strengthen teaching on online safety and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> This includes new expectations to cover different forms of harmful content, including illegal material, misogyny, violence and suicide and self-harm. Schools may also address suicide directly if appropriate training and support is in place.

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education (2025) Relationship Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education.

**Our analysis suggests that many schools are well placed to address certain forms of harmful content.** Among staff who taught about social media, most reported good or comprehensive coverage of a range of online harms, including misleading information (83%), abuse or hate (80%), misogyny (75%) and sexual content (75%). A slight majority also reported high levels of confidence addressing these topics.

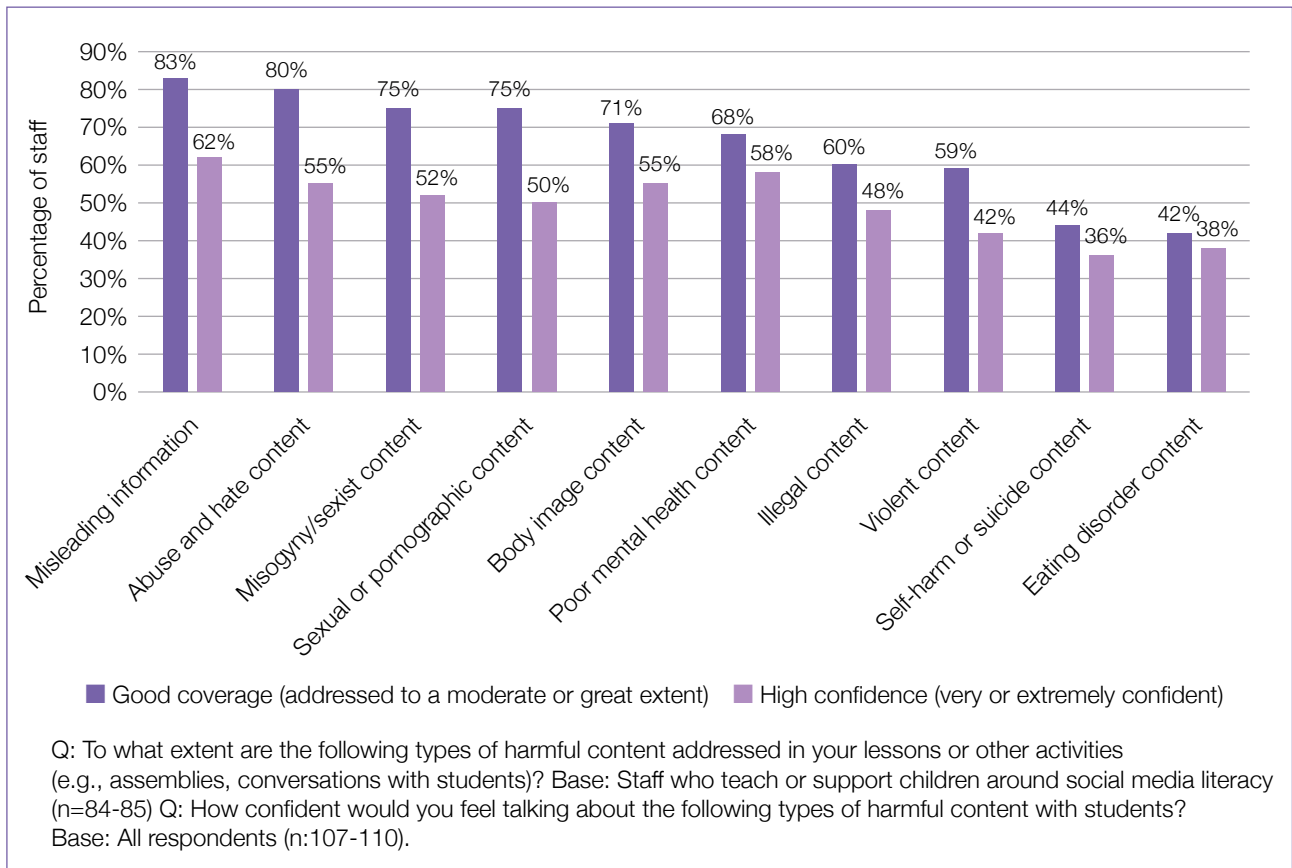
**However, there are concerning gaps in schools' readiness to address suicide and self-harm content.** In line with current curriculum expectations, suicide and self harm content (44%) and eating disorder content (42%) were least likely to have good or comprehensive coverage. Just 11% of staff cover suicide and self-harm to a great extent, falling to 6% for eating disorders.

**More concerningly, many staff lacked confidence around these topics, pointing to an urgent need for additional support to ensure staff can safely address them when the curriculum changes.** Over a third (34%) felt that they would be slightly or not at all confident talking about suicide or self-harm content with students, while similar proportions reported moderate (30%) and high (36%) confidence.<sup>7</sup>

In comparison, fewer than one in ten staff had little or no confidence addressing misogynistic content (10%), abuse and hate content (9%) and misleading information (7%).

Figure 3 shows the proportion of staff reporting good coverage and high confidence for each content type.

**Figure 3: Reported coverage and confidence around different forms of harmful content**



<sup>7</sup> Questions around confidence addressing different forms of harmful content were asked of all staff.

## Implications

Digital and media literacy is a fundamental life skill. As technology moves at pace, children's safety and wellbeing depends on their ability to recognise online risks, think critically about content, interactions and platform design, behave responsibly, and take practical steps to manage their online experiences.

However, the prize on offer is even greater. **High quality digital education can not only inoculate young people against online harm, it can support them to flourish in adulthood** – giving them the tools to thrive in an AI and digital economy, to vote at 16, and to deal with the threats a fractured information ecosystem poses to our democracy and national security.

**However, these findings point to deeply concerning gaps in how many schools currently support children to navigate social media**, with limited curriculum time, little training and uneven provision across different topics and year groups. Limited support for algorithmic literacy is particularly concerning, pointing to missed opportunities ranging from suicide prevention to preparing children for future workplaces.

## Recommendations

Looking ahead, Government must build on recent curriculum changes to deliver a bold reset of digital education.

This remains vital in light of plans for an under 16s social media ban, with many children likely to continue using both restricted and unrestricted platforms, and to encounter algorithmic recommendations across the stack.

The Government must:

- **Prioritise algorithmic literacy as a foundational competency.** Algorithmic recommendations now shape almost all online experiences. They are also a key driver of harm, including exposure to misinformation and harmful mental health content. Recent MRF research finds that, eight years after Molly's death, algorithmic feeds continue to bombard teens with suicide, self-harm and eating disorder content on a weekly basis.<sup>8</sup>

Government should urgently support schools to place greater emphasis on algorithmic literacy, equipping young people with a critical understanding of how algorithms, platform design and business models shape their online experiences, and giving them the skills to shape their feeds. In doing so, we can protect children from content based harms while empowering them to make the most of how information works in the modern world.

Practically, this means identifying opportunities to place renewed focus on these competencies in refreshed programmes of study following the Curriculum Review, commissioning new training and resources, and embedding algorithmic literacy as a core skill within strengthened cross-curricular guidance.

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<sup>8</sup> M.E.L Research (2026) Children's exposure to suicide, self-harm, eating disorder and depression content on social media: Wave 2 Findings.

- **Build on the Curriculum Review to embed a truly cross-curricular approach to digital and media literacy.** As this research shows, digital and media literacy remains a ‘tick box’ exercise for many schools, receiving limited curriculum time and undermined by a fragmented approach across subjects that drops away as children age.

Looking ahead, the Government must build on subject-specific changes promised in the Curriculum Review via decisive action to truly embed digital education across the entire curriculum at every key stage. This should include new guidance on best practice and a consolidated framework for how *all* subjects and wider activities should ‘sing in harmony’ to build key competencies, including algorithmic literacy.

- **Train every teacher to take responsibility for building digital life skills.** Many staff currently lack confidence addressing key elements of social media literacy, with many receiving little to no training. Government should look to embed digital and media literacy in Initial Teacher Training or Newly Qualified Teacher training, with DfE also commissioning consolidated and regularly updated CPD modules and a bank of high quality resources.
- **Offer additional support to ensure schools are ready for upcoming changes to the RSHE Curriculum.** As it stands, many teachers lack the necessary confidence to safely address online suicide and self-harm risks with children. The Government must urgently prioritise high quality training and additional funding for schools, above and beyond grants currently promised.

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For a briefing and discussion about how we can work together to tackle preventable harm,  
please contact [hello@mollyrosefoundation.org](mailto:hello@mollyrosefoundation.org)

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