SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE

Secondary | February 2026

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Children's Mental Health Week: This Is My Place

This year's **Children's Mental Health Week** is 9th-15th February and the theme is *'This Is My Place'*, highlighting the importance of belonging for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

As young people grow, they begin to explore their identity, values, friendships and independence. Feeling accepted and understood by peers, within school, at home and in wider communities, plays a vital role in protecting their mental health. When teenagers feel they belong, they are more likely to develop confidence, resilience and a positive sense of self.

Young people who feel disconnected, isolated or misunderstood may be more vulnerable to emotional distress or risky situations. Feeling listened to and supported by trusted adults helps teenagers feel safe enough to speak up when something isn't right.

This year, **Children's Mental Health Week** encourages families, schools and communities to think about how we can create inclusive, supportive environments where young people feel valued and respected - both offline and online.

Belonging in online spaces: Opportunities and risks

For many teenagers, the internet plays a significant role in helping them find a sense of belonging. Online communities, social media, gaming platforms and forums can allow young people to connect with others who share similar interests, identities or experiences. For some, especially those who feel different or isolated, these spaces can offer reassurance, understanding and friendship.

However, online spaces also carry risks. Not everyone online is who they claim to be and some communities may encourage harmful behaviours, unrealistic expectations or unhealthy relationships. Young people may be exposed to inappropriate content, pressured to share personal information or influenced by views that negatively affect their wellbeing. When online connections begin to replace real-life relationships or secrecy increases, this can increase vulnerability.

Supporting your child to navigate both the positives and risks of online belonging is an important part of keeping them safe and promoting good mental health.

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Safer Internet Day

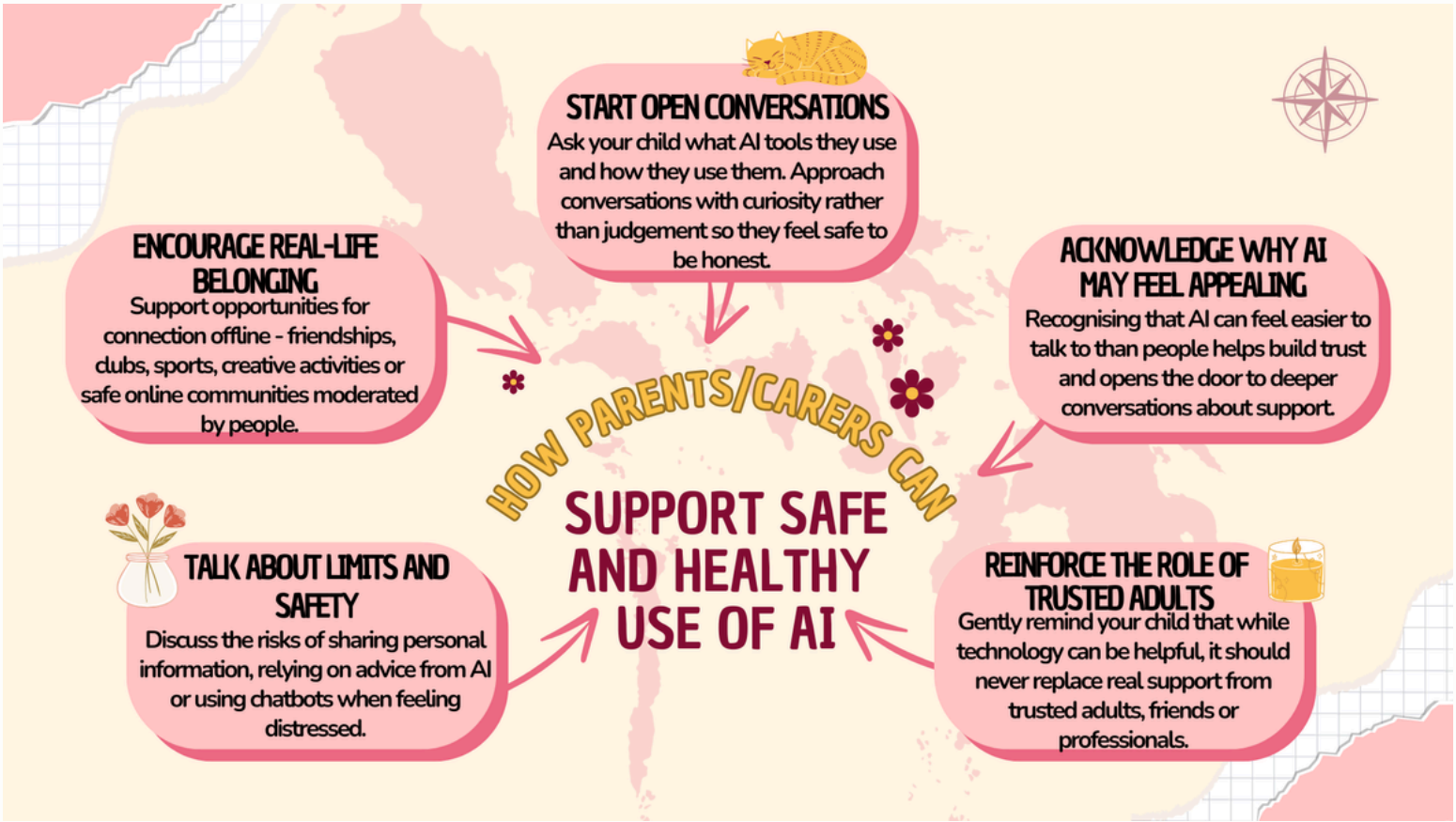
This year's **Safer Internet Day** is 10th February and the theme is '**Smart tech, safe choices - exploring the safe and responsible use of AI.'** As technology continues to develop rapidly, many teenagers are now engaging with AI-powered tools in new and complex ways.

For some young people, AI chatbots and digital assistants are becoming spaces where they feel listened to, understood or supported, particularly when they are struggling with their mental health or finding it difficult to talk to people around them. Adolescence is a time when young people are exploring who they are and where they fit and some may turn to online spaces or AI tools to find a sense of connection.

AI Chatbots, mental health and belonging

AI chatbots can feel safe and appealing to teenagers. They are always available, non-judgemental and easy to talk to. For some young people, especially those experiencing loneliness, anxiety or low mood, these tools may feel like a place where they belong or where they can express difficult feelings.

There can be positives to this. AI tools may help young people put their thoughts into words, feel less alone in the moment or take a first step towards recognising they need support.

However, there are also important risks parents should be aware of.

AI chatbots are not people. They cannot fully understand emotions, provide appropriate safeguarding responses or offer real emotional care. Some may give inaccurate, inappropriate or harmful advice, particularly around mental health. There is also a risk that young people begin to rely on AI for emotional support instead of seeking help from trusted adults or peers, which can increase isolation rather than reduce it. In some cases, these tools may collect personal data or encourage continued interaction without recognising when a young person is at risk.