

Searching, Screening and Confiscation Policy

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Searching

1. Searching can play a critical role in ensuring that schools are safe environments for all students and staff. It is a vital measure to safeguard and promote staff and student welfare, and to maintain high standards of behaviour through which students can learn and thrive.
2. The Principal and staff they authorise have a statutory power to search a student or their possessions where they have reasonable grounds to suspect that the student may have a prohibited item listed in paragraph 3¹ or any other item that the school rules² identify as an item which may be searched for.
3. The list of prohibited items is:
 - knives and weapons;
 - alcohol;
 - illegal drugs;
 - stolen items;
 - any article that the member of staff reasonably suspects has been, or is likely to be used:
 - to commit an offence, or
 - to cause personal injury to, or damage to property of; any person (including the student).
 - an article specified in regulations:³
 - tobacco and cigarette papers;⁴
 - fireworks; and
 - pornographic images
 - The Principal and authorised staff can also search for any item banned by the school rules which has been identified in the rules as an item which may be searched for.

¹ A 'prohibited item' is defined in subsection (3) of [Section 550ZA of the Education Act 1996](#).

² For maintained schools, see [Section 89, Education and Inspections Act 2006](#). For independent schools and academies, see [Schedule 1, Paragraph 9 of the Education \(Independent School Standards\) \(England\) Regulations 2014](#). For more information on what should be included in a school's behaviour policy, see the [Behaviour in Schools guidance](#).

³ [The Schools \(Specification and Disposal of Articles\) Regulations 2012](#).

⁴ This does not include e-cigarettes or vapes. Schools who wish to search for these items should ensure they are listed as items for which a search can be made in the school rules.

4. Under common law, school staff have the power to search a student for any item if the student agrees. The member of staff should ensure the student understands the reason for the search and how it will be conducted so that their agreement is informed.

5. Being in possession of a prohibited item – especially knives, weapons, illegal drugs or stolen items – may mean that the student is involved, or at risk of being involved, in anti-social or criminal behaviour including gang involvement, and in some cases may be involved in child criminal exploitation. A search may play a vital role in identifying students who may benefit from early help or a referral to the local authority children’s social care services. See [Keeping children safe in education and Working together to safeguard children](#).

6. The school’s Rewards, Discipline & Behaviour policy outlines the banned items for which a search can be made. This includes the list of prohibited items in paragraph 3, and includes other items which the Principal has decided are detrimental to maintaining high standards of behaviour and a safe environment. See [Behaviour in Schools](#).

7. The school’s Rewards, Discipline & Behaviour policy is communicated to all members of the school community⁵ to ensure expectations are transparent to all students, parents and staff, and provide reassurance that any searching of a student will be implemented consistently, proportionately and fairly, in line with the school’s policy.

8. When exercising their powers, the school considers the age and needs of students being searched or screened. This includes the individual needs or learning difficulties of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and making reasonable adjustments that may be required where a student has a disability.

9. School staff may wish to consider using CCTV footage to decide whether to conduct a search for an item.

⁵ This is a duty for Principals of maintained schools. See [Section 89 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#).

The role of the Principal, the designated safeguarding lead and authorised members of staff

10. Only the Principal, or a member of staff authorised by the Principal, can carry out a search. The Principal can authorise individual members of staff to search for specific items, or all items set out in the school's behaviour policy. For example, a member of staff may be authorised to search for stolen property and alcohol but not for weapons or drugs.

11. The Principal can require a member of the security staff to undertake a search. If a security guard, who is not a member of the school staff, searches a student, this guidance should be followed and the person witnessing the search should be a permanent member of the school staff. The Principal may not require any other member of staff to undertake a search if they refuse.⁶

12. The Principal should oversee the school's practice of searching to ensure that a culture of safe, proportionate and appropriate searching is maintained, which safeguards the welfare of all students and staff with support from the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy).

13. The Principal should ensure that a sufficient number of staff are appropriately trained in how to lawfully and safely search a student who is not co-operating, so that these trained staff can support and advise other members of staff if this situation arises. However, it is vital that all staff understand their rights and the rights of the student who is being searched.

14. The designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) should be informed of any searching incidents where the member of staff had reasonable grounds to suspect a student was in possession of a prohibited item as listed in paragraph 3. The staff member should also involve the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) without delay if they believe that a search has revealed a safeguarding risk.

15. If the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) finds evidence that any child is at risk of harm, they should make a referral to children's social care services immediately (as set out in part 1 of [Keeping children safe in education](#)). The designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) should then consider the circumstances of the student who has been searched to assess the incident against potential wider safeguarding concerns. See paragraphs 44-46 on recording searches.

Before searching

16. A search can be considered if the member of staff has reasonable grounds for suspecting that the student is in possession of a prohibited item or any item identified in the

⁶ [Section 550ZB of the Education Act 1996](#).

school rules for which a search can be made, or if the student has agreed. See paragraphs 2-4 on powers to search.

17. The authorised member of staff should assess how urgent the need for a search is and should consider the risk to other students and staff.

18. Before any search takes place, the member of staff conducting the search should explain to the student why they are being searched, how and where the search is going to take place and give them the opportunity to ask any questions.

19. The authorised member of staff should always seek the co-operation of the student before conducting a search. If the student is not willing to co-operate with the search, the member of staff should consider why this is. Reasons might include that they:

- are in possession of a prohibited item;
- do not understand the instruction;
- are unaware of what a search may involve; or
- have had a previous distressing experience of being searched.

20. If a student continues to refuse to co-operate, the member of staff may sanction the student in line with the school's behaviour policy, ensuring that they are responding to misbehaviour consistently and fairly. See [Behaviour in Schools](#) for more information on lawful sanctions.

21. If the member of staff still considers a search to be necessary, but is not required urgently, they should seek the advice of the Principal, designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) or pastoral member of staff who may have more information about the student. During this time the student should be supervised and kept away from other students.

22. If the student still refuses to co-operate, the member of staff should assess whether it is appropriate to use reasonable force to conduct the search. A member of staff can use such force as is reasonable to search for any prohibited items identified in paragraph 3, but not to search for items which are identified only in the school rules.⁷ See guidance on the [Use of reasonable force in schools](#). The decision to use reasonable force should be made on a case-by-case basis. The member of staff should consider whether conducting the search will prevent the student harming themselves or others, damaging property or from causing disorder.⁸

⁷ [Section 550ZB\(5\) of the Education Act 1996.](#)

⁸ [Section 93\(1\) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.](#)

23. It should be noted that the use of reasonable force will differ depending on whether the member of staff is searching possessions or the student themselves

During a search

Where

24. An appropriate location for the search should be found. Where possible, this should be away from other students. The search must only take place on the school premises or where the member of staff has lawful control or charge of the student, for example on a school trip.⁹

Who

25. The law states the member of staff conducting the search must be of the same sex as the student being searched. There must be another member of staff present as a witness to the search.

26. There is a limited exception to this rule. This is that a member of staff can search a student of the opposite sex and/or without a witness present **only**:

- if the member of staff carrying out the search reasonably believes there is risk that serious harm will be caused to a person if the search is not carried out as a matter of urgency; **and**
- in the time available, it is not reasonably practicable for the search to be carried out by a member of staff who is same sex as the student **or** it is not reasonably practicable for the search to be carried out in the presence of another member of staff.¹⁰

27. When a member of staff conducts a search without a witness they should immediately report this to another member of staff, and ensure a record of the search is kept. See paragraphs 44-46 on recording searches.

The extent of the search

28. A member of staff may search a student's outer clothing, pockets, possessions, desks or lockers.

⁹ The powers to search outlined in this guidance only apply in England. When on a trip outside England, the law of that country should be followed.

¹⁰ [Section 550ZB of the Education Act 1996](#).

29. The person conducting the search must not require the student to remove any clothing other than outer clothing. 'Outer clothing' means any item of clothing that is not worn wholly next to the skin or immediately over a garment that is being worn as underwear, as well as hats, shoes, boots or scarves.¹¹
30. 'Possessions' means any goods over which the student has or appears to have control - this includes desks, lockers and bags.
31. A member of staff is able to search lockers and desks or other personal spaces at the school for any item provided the student agrees. Schools can make it a condition of having the locker or space that the student agrees to have these searched. If the student withdraws their agreement to search, a search may be conducted both for the prohibited items listed in paragraph 3 and any items identified in the school rules for which a search can be made.
32. A student's possessions can only be searched in the presence of the student and another member of staff, except where there is a risk that serious harm will be caused to a person if the search is not conducted immediately and where it is not reasonably practicable to summon another member of staff. See paragraphs 25-27 on who can conduct a search.
33. The member of staff may use a metal detector to assist with the search.
34. The member of staff's power to search outlined above does not enable them to conduct a strip search.

Strip searching

35. A strip search is a search involving the removal of more than outer clothing (see paragraph 29). Strip searches on school premises can only be carried out by police officers under the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(PACE\) Code A](#) and in accordance with the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(PACE\) Code C](#).¹² While the decision to undertake the strip search itself and its conduct are police matters, school staff retain a duty of care to the student(s) involved and should advocate for student wellbeing at all times.
36. Before calling police into school, staff should assess and balance the risk of a potential strip search on the student's mental and physical wellbeing and the risk of not recovering the suspected item. Staff should consider whether introducing the potential for a strip search

¹¹ Staff members should be sensitive to whether such outer clothing is worn for religious reasons when conducting a search.

¹² Searches may entail different levels of invasiveness and exposure. A search under [PACE Code A](#) that involves removing more than outer clothing but does not expose intimate parts of the body would not require the presence of an appropriate adult. However, from a student wellbeing perspective, schools may wish to involve an appropriate adult as a matter of course during all searches conducted by police.

through police involvement is absolutely necessary, and should always ensure that other appropriate, less invasive approaches have been exhausted. Once the police are on school premises, the decision on whether to conduct a strip search lies solely with them, and the role of the school is to advocate for the safety and wellbeing of the student(s) involved.

37. Unless there is an immediate risk of harm and where reasonably possible, staff should inform a parent of the student suspected of concealing an item in advance of the search, even if the parent is not acting as the appropriate adult. Parents should always be informed by a staff member once a strip search has taken place. Schools should keep records of strip searches that have been conducted on school premises and monitor them for any trends that emerge.

The process the police must follow during a strip search

38. Except in cases of urgency where there is risk of serious harm to the student or others, whenever a strip search involves exposure of intimate body parts there must be at least two people present other than the student, one of which must be the appropriate adult.¹² If the student's parent would like to be the appropriate adult, the school should facilitate this where possible. Police officers carrying out the search must be of the same sex as the student being searched. An appropriate adult not of the same sex as the student being searched may be present if specifically requested by the student. Otherwise, no-one of a different sex to the student being searched is permitted to be present, and the search must not be carried out in a location where the student could be seen by anyone else.

39. Except in urgent cases as above, a search of a student may take place without an appropriate adult only if the student explicitly states in the presence of an appropriate adult that they do not want an appropriate adult to be present during the search and the appropriate adult agrees. A record should be made of the student's decision and signed by the appropriate adult. The presence of more than two people, other than an appropriate adult, shall be permitted only in the most exceptional circumstances.

40. Strip searching can be highly distressing for the student involved, as well as for staff and other students affected, especially if undertaken on school premises. [PACE Code C](#) states that a strip search may take place only if it is considered necessary to remove an item related to a criminal offence, and the officer reasonably considers the student might

¹² The role of the appropriate adult is to safeguard the rights, entitlements and welfare of children and vulnerable adults in police custody. This adult must not be a police officer or otherwise associated with the police. Examples of an appropriate adult include, but are not limited to, a parent, relative, social worker, teacher or, if the person is in the care of a local authority or voluntary organisation, a person representing that authority or organisation. Note that an appropriate adult is not required when a student is eighteen or above.

have concealed such an item. Strip searches should not be routinely carried out if there is no reason to consider that such items are concealed.

After-care following a strip search

41. Students should be given appropriate support, irrespective of whether the suspected item is found. If an item is found, this may be a police matter, but should always be accompanied by a safeguarding process handled by the school which gives attention to the student's wellbeing and involves relevant staff, such as the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy).¹³ Safeguarding should also be at the centre of support following a strip search in which the item is not found, both in the sense of supporting the student to deal with the experience of being searched, and regarding wider issues that may have informed the decision to conduct a strip search in the first place. In both cases, students should feel that they have an opportunity to express their views regarding the strip search and the events surrounding it. School staff should give particular consideration to any students who have been strip searched more than once and/or groups of students who are more likely to be subjected to strip searching with unusual frequency, and consider preventative approaches.

After a search

42. Whether or not any items have been found as a result of any search, schools should consider whether the reasons for the search, the search itself, or the outcome of the search give cause to suspect that the student is suffering, or is likely to suffer harm, and/or whether any specific support is needed. Where this may be the case, school staff should follow the school's child protection policy and speak to the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) as set out in [Part 1 of Keeping children safe in education](#). They will consider if pastoral support, an early help intervention or a referral to children's social care is appropriate. If any prohibited items are found during the search, the member of staff should follow the guidance set out below in paragraphs 57-81 on confiscation.

43. If a student is found to be in possession of a prohibited item listed in paragraph 3, then the staff member should alert the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) and the student should be sanctioned in line with the school's behaviour policy to ensure consistency of approach.

¹³ Further information on safeguarding can be found in [Keeping children safe in education](#) and [Working together to safeguard children](#).

Recording searches

44. Any search by a member of staff for a **prohibited item** listed in paragraph 3 and all searches conducted by police officers should be recorded in the school's safeguarding reporting system, including whether or not an item is found. This will allow the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) to identify possible risks and initiate a safeguarding response if required.

45. Schools are encouraged to include in the record of each search:

- the date, time and location of the search;
- which student was searched;
- who conducted the search and any other adults or students present;
- what was being searched for;
- the reason for searching;
- what items, if any, were found; and
- what follow-up action was taken as a consequence of the search.

46. Schools who conduct a high number of searches should consider whether the searches fall disproportionately on any particular groups of students by analysing the recorded data. In such cases where searching is falling disproportionately on any group or groups, they should consider whether any actions should be taken to prevent this. See also paragraphs 108-110 of [Behaviour in Schools](#).

Informing parents

47. Schools should reinforce the whole-school approach by building and maintaining positive relationships with parents. Parents should **always** be informed of any search for a **prohibited item** listed in paragraph 3 that has taken place, and the outcome of the search as soon as is practicable. A member of staff should inform the parents of what, if anything, has been confiscated and the resulting action the school has taken, including any sanctions applied.

48. Schools should consider that in some circumstances it might also be necessary to inform parents of a search for an item banned by the school policy.

49. Any complaints about searching, screening or confiscation should be dealt with through the normal school complaints procedure.

Screening

50. Screening can help provide reassurance to students, staff and parents that the school is taking measures to create a calm, safe and supportive environment.

51. Schools' statutory power to make rules on student behaviour¹⁴ and their duties as employers in relation to the safety of staff, students and visitors¹⁵ enables them to impose a requirement that students undergo screening.

52. Screening is the use of a walk-through or hand-held metal detector (arch or wand) to scan all students for weapons before they enter the school premises.

53. Before considering the installation and use of any technology for screening, the Principal is encouraged to consult with the local police who may be able to provide advice about whether installation of these devices is appropriate.¹⁶

54. If a Principal decides to introduce a screening arrangement, they should inform students and parents in advance to explain what the screening will involve and why it will be introduced.

55. Where a student has a disability, schools should make any reasonable adjustments to the screening process that may be required.¹⁷

56. If a student refuses to be screened, the member of staff should consider why the student is not co-operating, and make an assessment of whether it is necessary to carry out a search. See paragraphs 18-23 for more information on when a student refuses a search, including sanctioning.

Confiscation

Items found as a result of a search

57. An authorised staff member carrying out a search can confiscate any item that they have reasonable grounds for suspecting:

- poses a risk to staff or students;
- is prohibited, or identified in the school rules for which a search can be made (see paragraphs 2-3); or
- is evidence in relation to an offence.

¹⁴ [Section 89 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#) for all maintained schools, PRUs and NMSS and the [Education \(Independent School Standards\) \(England\) Regulations 2010](#) for independent schools, academy schools and alternative provision academies.

¹⁵ [Section 3 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974](#).

¹⁶ [School and college security](#).

¹⁷ See [Equality Act 2010 and schools](#) for further guidance on the duty to make reasonable adjustments for students with a disability.

Prohibited or illegal items

58. **Controlled drugs** must be delivered to the police as soon as possible unless there is a good reason not to do so.¹⁸ In these cases, the member of staff must safely dispose of the drugs. In determining whether there is a good reason to dispose of controlled drugs, the member of staff must have regard to the following guidance in paragraph 59 below issued by the Secretary of State.

59. The member of staff should take into account all relevant circumstances and use their professional judgement to determine whether they can safely dispose of the controlled drug. When staff are unsure as to the legal status of a substance and have reason to believe it may be a controlled drug, they should treat it as such. If the member of staff is in doubt about the safe disposal of controlled drugs, they should deliver them to the police.

60. **Other substances** which are not believed to be controlled should also be delivered to the police, or disposed of as above, if the member of staff believes they could be harmful.

61. Where a person conducting a search finds **alcohol, tobacco, cigarette papers or fireworks**, they may retain or dispose of them as they think appropriate but should not return them to the student.

62. If a member of staff finds a **pornographic image**, they may dispose of the image unless they have reasonable grounds to suspect that its possession constitutes a specified offence (i.e. it is extreme or an indecent image of a child) in which case it must be delivered to the police as soon as reasonably practicable.¹⁹ Members of staff should never intentionally view any indecent image of a child (also sometimes known as nude or semi-nude images). Staff must never copy, print, share, store or save such images. See paragraphs 72-79 for further advice on searching electronic devices.

63. Where a member of staff finds **stolen items**, these must be delivered to the police as soon as reasonably practicable. However, if there is good reason to do so, the member of staff may also return the item to the owner, or retain or dispose of it if returning them to their owner is not practicable. In determining whether there is a good reason to return the stolen item to its owner or retain or dispose of the item, the member of staff must have regard to the following guidance issued by the Secretary of State in paragraph 64 below.

64. The member of staff should take into account all relevant circumstances and use their professional judgement to determine whether they can safely dispose of the seized article. In

¹⁸ Legally, schools do not have to give the name of the student from whom drugs have been taken to the police. Schools should consider this on a case-by-case basis. Please see the [DfE and ACPO drug advice for schools](#) for more information on the relevant powers and duties in relation to powers to search for and confiscate drugs, liaison with the police and with parents.

¹⁹ [Section 62 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009](#) defines prohibited images of children. [Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigrations Act 2008](#) defines extreme pornographic images.

taking into account the relevant circumstances, the member of staff should consider the following:

- the value of the item - it would not be reasonable or desirable to involve the police in dealing with low value items such as pencil cases, though school staff may judge it appropriate to contact the police if the items are valuable;
- whether the item is banned by the school;
- whether retaining or returning the item to the owner may place any person at risk of harm; and
- whether the item can be disposed of safely.

65. Any **weapons or items which are evidence of a suspected offence** must be passed to the police as soon as possible.

66. Items that **have been (or are likely to be) used to commit an offence or to cause personal injury or damage to property** should be delivered to the police as soon as reasonably practicable, returned to the owner, retained or disposed of. In deciding what to do with such an item, the member of staff must have regard to the guidance issued by the Secretary of State in paragraphs 67-68.

67. The member of staff should take into account all relevant circumstances and use their professional judgement to determine whether the item should be delivered to the police, retained, returned to the owner or disposed of. In taking into account all relevant circumstances the member of staff should consider:

- whether it is safe to dispose of the item; and
- whether and when it is safe to return the item.

68. If a member staff suspects a confiscated item has been used to commit an offence or is evidence in relation to an offence, the item should be delivered to the police.

69. Members of staff should use their judgement to decide to return, retain or dispose of any other **items banned under the school rules**. In deciding what to do with such an item, the member of staff must have regard to the guidance issued by the Secretary of State in paragraph 70.

70. The member of staff should take into account all relevant circumstances and use their professional judgement to determine whether they can safely dispose of the seized item. In taking into account all relevant circumstances, the member of staff should consider:

- the value of the item;
- whether it is appropriate to return the item to the student or parent; and
- whether the item is likely to continue to disrupt learning or the calm, safe and supportive environment of the school.

71. Members of staff should follow any additional guidance and procedures on the retention and disposal of items put in place by the school.

Electronic devices

72. Electronic devices, including mobile phones, can contain files or data which relate to an offence, or which may cause harm to another person. This includes, but is not limited to, indecent images of children, pornography, abusive messages, images or videos, or evidence relating to suspected criminal behaviour.

73. As with all prohibited items, staff should first consider the appropriate safeguarding response if they find images, data or files on an electronic device that they reasonably suspect are likely to put a person at risk.

74. Staff may examine any data or files on an electronic device they have confiscated as a result of a search, as defined in paragraph 57, if there is good reason to do so.

75. If the member of staff conducting the search suspects they may find an indecent image of a child (sometimes known as nude or semi-nude images), the member of staff should never intentionally view the image, and must never copy, print, share, store or save such images. When an incident might involve an indecent image of a child and/or video, the member of staff should confiscate the device, avoid looking at the device and refer the incident to the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy) as the most appropriate person to advise on the school's response. Handling such reports or concerns can be especially complicated and schools should follow the principles as set out in [Keeping children safe in education](#). The UK Council for Internet Safety also provides the following guidance to support school staff and designated safeguarding leads: [Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people](#).

76. If a member of staff finds any image, data or file that they suspect might constitute a specified offence, then they must be delivered to the police as soon as is reasonably practicable.

77. In exceptional circumstances members of staff may dispose of the image or data if there is a good reason to do so. In determining a 'good reason' to examine or erase the data or files, the member of staff must have regard to the following guidance issued by the Secretary of State in paragraphs 78 and 79 below.

78. In determining whether there is a **'good reason' to examine** the data or files, the member of staff should reasonably suspect that the data or file on the device has been, or could be used, to cause harm, undermine the safe environment of the school and disrupt teaching, or be used to commit an offence.

79. In determining whether there is a **'good reason' to erase** any data or files from the device, the member of staff should consider whether the material found may constitute evidence relating to a suspected offence. In those instances, the data or files should not be

deleted, and the device must be handed to the police as soon as it is reasonably practicable. If the data or files are not suspected to be evidence in relation to an offence, a member of staff may delete the data or files if the continued existence of the data or file is likely to continue to cause harm to any person and the student and/or the parent refuses to delete the data or files themselves.

Confiscation as a disciplinary penalty

80. Schools' general power to discipline enables a member of staff to confiscate, retain or dispose of a student's property as a disciplinary penalty, where reasonable to do so.²⁰

81. The law protects members of staff from liability in any proceedings brought against them for any loss of, or damage to, any item they have confiscated, provided they acted lawfully.

²⁰ [Section 91 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.](#)

Further information

Other relevant departmental advice and statutory guidance

- [Behaviour in Schools guidance](#)
- [Schools and College security guidance](#)
- [Equality Act 2010 and schools guidance](#)
- [Keeping children safe in education guidance](#)
- [Use of reasonable force in schools guidance](#)
- [Working together to safeguard children guidance](#)
- [DfE and ACPO drug advice for schools](#)

Other advice

- [Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people](#)
- [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(PACE\) codes of practice](#)