The dangers of group chats and WhatsApp

What are chat apps?

Chat apps allow the user to send messages, photos, videos and documents, as well as creating large group chats.

Some apps allow users to message people they don't know, so your child could receive messages from strangers - most apps have settings to allow this to be changed so that they only receive messages from people they know. With your child, make sure these settings are in place and show them how to reject requests from an unfamiliar person.

A study by **Internet Matters** found that parents of children aged 11 to 13 are the most concerned (85%) that bullying can take place in group conversations on social media.

Even with friends, your child might see something that upsets them. There are many safety settings that you may not know about.

What do parents have to be aware of?

In Europe and the UK, the minimum age of use for WhatsApp is 16 years old. It had previously dropped to 13 years old but in April 2018 returned to 16, as a response to data-protection legislation.

Like many age restrictions on social media apps, some children may choose to ignore this and sign up for WhatsApp when they're younger.

WhatsApp's main purpose is to send messages to friends. It isn't public in the same way that Twitter is, and people can only message friends who are already added on their phone. As long as a child only has trusted people as contacts on their phone, it is a relatively safe social media app.

The main thing to discuss with them is how to act in group chats, as here people not in their contacts will be able to see all the messages and send them messages. Also, it is important to discuss that once a message is sent, it is no longer in their possession. If it is inappropriate, it could either be sent to someone who may then report it to the police or passed around their peers.

Safety settings in chat apps

A risk for children and young people using chat apps is being added to group chats where they don't know the other people in the group, which could increase the chance they come across upsetting or negative messages. However, there is also a risk when they do know the other people in the group too.

Many of the chat apps have different privacy settings to help restrict who can contact you. If your child is using a chat app, we'd recommend looking at the privacy settings to see what's most appropriate. If there aren't any options to restrict contact then we'd recommend that your child doesn't use the app.

Group chats

The group chat function allows up to 1024 people to chat in one conversation stream. Each group is set up by one person, known as the group admin, who is the only person who can add or remove participants and change or add further group administrators.

Anybody in the group, even if they're not one of your phone contacts, will be able to see messages that you post, and you will be able to see theirs. If you are added to a group with someone you have blocked, that person will still be able to contact you in the group chat.

You can't always control if you're added to a group chat; but remind children that they can always control their own participation within it – they can leave whenever they want to.

To do this, when on the group's page, tap the three dots in the top right (or the name of the group at the top of the screen on an iPhone), then tap Group info, then EXIT GROUP in the red box at the bottom of the screen (or scroll down to Exit Group on an iPhone).

WhatsApp safety settings(Tab content expanded)

To prevent children being added to groups by people they don't know in WhatsApp, we recommend changing the group chat settings from 'Everyone' to 'My Contacts Except…' and using the tick icon to select all contacts.

The 'My Contacts Except…' option means only your child's phone contacts, except those you exclude, can add your child to groups. But by selecting all contacts, it means that nobody should be able to add your child to a group chat without first sending them an invitation.

Reporting and Blocking

There is no direct way to report a user, or specific abuse, other than to block them from sending you further messages. To block a contact, when the conversation is open, click on the 3 dots on the top right, tap 'More', then 'Block'.

Blocked contacts won't be able to see your profile information, and they won't be able to contact you. To permanently delete a contact from WhatsApp, you'll need to delete them from the contacts on your phone.

Full safety details for WhatsApp can be found **in their FAQs**. This can be from spamming to abusive or inappropriate content or behaviour. However, WhatsApp reminds users that If they feel that they or someone else is in emotional or physical danger, they should contact your local law enforcement authorities.

If you're concerned that a child may have experienced abuse whilst using WhatsApp, you can file a report with CEOP **here**.
Chat apps | NSPCC

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