

What parents need to know about WhatsApp

All National Online Safety, we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one of many apps which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guidance, tips and sign for adults.

What Parents & Carers Need to Know about WHATSAPP

WhatsApp is the world's most popular messaging service, with around two billion users exchanging texts, photos, videos and documents, as well as making voice and video calls. Its end-to-end encryption means messages can only be viewed by the sender and any recipients; not even WhatsApp can read them. Updates to its privacy policy in 2021 (involving sharing data with parent company Facebook) caused millions to leave the app, but the new policy was widely misinterpreted - it only related to WhatsApp's business features, not to personal messages.

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WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

SCAMS
Fraudsters occasionally send WhatsApp messages pretending to offer prizes - encouraging the user to click on a link to win. Other common scams involve winning someone's phone. WhatsApp subscription has run out (aiming to dupe them into disclosing payment details) or impersonating a friend or relative and asking for money to be transferred to help with an emergency.

DISAPPEARING MESSAGES
Users can set WhatsApp messages to disappear in 24 hours, 7 days or 90 days by default. Photos and videos can also be instructed to disappear after the recipient has viewed them. These files can't be saved or forwarded - so if your child was sent an inappropriate message, it would be difficult to prove any wrongdoing. However, the receiver can take a screenshot and save that as evidence.

ENABLING FAKE NEWS
WhatsApp has unfortunately been linked to accelerating the spread of dangerous rumours. In India in 2018, some outbreaks of mob violence appear to have been sparked by false allegations being shared on the app. WhatsApp itself took steps to prevent its users circulating hazardous theories and speculation in the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic.

POTENTIAL CYBERBULLYING
Group chat and video calls are great for connecting with multiple people in WhatsApp, but there is always the potential for someone's feelings to be hurt by an unkind comment or joke. The 'admins' feature gives the admin(s) of a group control over who can send messages. They can also remove, block people from posting in a chat, which could make a child feel excluded and upset.

CONTACT FROM STRANGERS
To start a WhatsApp chat, you only need the mobile number of the person you want to message (the other person also needs to have the app). WhatsApp can access the address book on someone's device and recognise which of their contacts also use the app. So if your child has ever given their phone number to someone they don't know, that person could use it to contact them via WhatsApp.

LOCATION SHARING
The 'live location' feature lets users share their current whereabouts, allowing friends to see their movements. WhatsApp describes it as a simple and secure way to let people know where you are. It is a useful method for a young person to let loved ones know they're safe - but if they used it in a chat with people they don't know, they would be exposing their location to them, too.

Advice for Parents & Carers

CREATE A SAFE PROFILE
Even though someone would need a child's phone number to add them as a contact, it's also worth altering a young person's profile settings to restrict who can see their photo and status. The options are 'everyone', 'my contacts' and 'nobody' - choosing one of the latter two ensures that your child's profile is better protected.

EXPLAIN ABOUT BLOCKING
If your child receives spam or offensive messages, calls or files from a contact, they should block them using 'settings' in the chat. Communication from a blocked contact won't show up on their device and stays undelivered. Blocking someone does not remove them from your child's contact list - so they also need to be deleted from the address book.

REPORT POTENTIAL SCAMS
Young people shouldn't engage with any message that looks suspicious or too good to be true. When your child receives a message from an unknown number for the first time, they'll be given the option to report it as spam. If the sender claims to be a friend or relative, call that person on their usual number to verify it really is them, or if it's someone trying to trick your child.

LEAVE A GROUP
If your child is in a group chat that is making them feel uncomfortable, or has been added to a group that they don't want to be part of, they can use WhatsApp's group settings to leave. If someone exits a group, the admin can add them back in once, if they leave a second time, it is permanent.

THINK ABOUT LOCATION
If your child needs to use the 'live location' function to show you or one of their friends where they are, advise them to share their location only for as long as they need to. WhatsApp gives a range of 'live location' options, and your child should manually stop sharing their position as soon as it is no longer needed.

DELETE ACCIDENTAL MESSAGES
If your child posts a message they want to delete, WhatsApp allows the user seven minutes to erase a message. Tap and hold on the message, choose 'delete' and then 'delete for everyone'. However, it's important to remember that recipients may have seen (and taken a screenshot of) a message before it was deleted.

CHECK THE FACTS
You can now fact-check WhatsApp messages that have been forwarded at least five times, by double-tapping the magnifying glass icon to the right of the message. From there, your child can launch a Google search and decide for themselves whether the message was true or not.

Meet Our Expert
Parveen Kaur is a social media expert and digital media consultant who is passionate about improving digital literacy for parents and children. She has extensive experience in the social media arena and is the founder of Kids iClick, a web resource that helps parents and children thrive in a digital world.

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Founded in the US by two former Yahoo employees, WhatsApp was already extremely popular when it was bought by Facebook in 2014, sending its usage figures stratospheric. Now, more than 50% of the two youngest generations (Millennials and Generation Z) use WhatsApp every day – including many who are well below the app's specified age threshold.

Wherever there is a young and dedicated user-base, of course, the threat of grooming is a sinister, ever-present spectre. Indeed, some aspects of WhatsApp which are designed to be helpful or increase privacy – such as disappearing messages and live location services – actually exacerbate the risks. Check out today's #WakeUpWednesday guide for all the details.

As people sought a quick, reliable way to stay in touch with loved ones at the onset of the pandemic, WhatsApp experienced a jump of 40% in its usage figures. It's now been downloaded by almost a third of the planet's entire population – with more than half (53%) of those users opening the app at least once per day.

WhatsApp's everyday familiarity, however, can actually disguise some of the risks around its use. Scammers, for instance, are increasingly turning to the app as a vehicle for cons, while it's also being chosen as a means of adding credibility to fake news stories. Updated for 2022, our #WakeUpWednesday guide brings trusted adults the lowdown on the instant messaging giant.