

Woodthorpe Primary School

Woodthorpe Online Safety Newsletter

Chat Apps: WhatsApp and Snapchat

As the number of devices that children have access to is on the rise, the number of messaging and chat apps that are available are also increasing. We are aware that they are a great way for children to stay in touch with friends and family but it is equally important for conversations to be held about who our children are talking to, and in what capacity they know the other person/people. Please encourage **open conversations** about messaging: remind children to be conscious of the personal information they are sharing (particularly messages that may involve their name, location, school name, photographs etc) and who they are sharing this with.

It is important to note that some apps allow users to message, and receive messages, from people that they do not know- most apps do have **settings** that allow this to be changed. We would like to encourage you to ensure that these settings are in place. Within school, we have become aware of the increase in use of **WhatsApp**, which has a variety of safety settings that can be utilised to support our children. In order to prevent them from being added to groups by people that they do not know, we recommend changing their group chat settings from **'Everyone'** to **'My Contacts Except...'** and using the tick icon to **select all contacts**. This will ensure that no one should be able to add your child into a group chat without sending them an invitation first.

Social Media Advice: Snapchat

We are also aware that Snapchat is used by a number of our children within school, despite its 13+ age rating.

What Parents & Carers Need to Know about SNAPCHAT **AGE RESTRICTION 13+**

At 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 guides, hints and tips for adults.

Snapchat is an instant messaging app which allows users to send images, videos and texts to people in their friends list. One of Snapchat's unique features is that pictures and messages 'disappear' 24 hours after they've been viewed; however, this content isn't as temporary as many believe - with some users saving screenshots or using another device to take a photo of their screen. This year, Snapchat added 'My AI': a customisable chatbot with which people can chat and share secrets, as well as asking for advice and suggestions of places to visit.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

CONNECTING WITH STRANGERS
Even if your child only connects with people they know, they may still get friend requests from strangers. The Quick Add option lets users befriend people the app recommends - but these 'friends' are merely a username, which could have anyone behind it. Accepting such requests reveals children's personal information through the Story, Snapmap and Spotlight features, potentially putting them at risk from predators.

EXCESSIVE USE
Snapchat works hard on user engagement, with features like streaks (messaging the same person every day to build up a high score). Spotlight Challenges tempt users into spending time producing content in search of cash prizes and online fame, while it's easy for children to pass hours watching Spotlight's endless scroll of videos.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT
Some videos and posts on Snapchat aren't suitable for children. The hashtags used to group content are determined by the poster, so even an innocent search term could still yield age-inappropriate results. The app's 'disappearing messages' feature also makes it easy for young people (teens in particular) to share explicit images on impulse - so sexting continues to be a risk associated with Snapchat.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
My AI is Snapchat's new chatbot, which replies to questions in a human-like manner. However, the software is still in its infancy and has significant drawbacks, such as biased, incorrect or misleading responses. There have already been numerous reports of young users turning to AI for medical help and diagnoses, which could be inaccurate and therefore potentially dangerous.

ONLINE PRESSURES
Although many of Snapchat's filters are designed to entertain or amuse, the 'beauty' effects on photos can set unrealistic body-image expectations - creating feelings of inadequacy if a young person compares themselves unfavourably with other users. Snapchat now also has 'priority' notifications (which still get displayed even if a device is in 'do not disturb' mode), increasing the pressure on users to log back in and interact.

VISIBLE LOCATION
Snap Map highlights a device's exact position of a virtual map which is visible to other users. There are options to restrict who can see the information: all friends, only you (Ghost Mode) or selected friends. Snapchat also has real-time location sharing, which is intended as a buddy system to ensure friends have reached home safely - but which could also be used to track a young person for more sinister reasons.

Advice for Parents & Carers

TURN OFF QUICK ADD
The Quick Add feature helps people find each other on the app. This function works based on mutual friends or whether someone's number is in your child's contacts list. Explain to your child that this could potentially make their profile visible to strangers. We recommend that your child turns off Quick Add, which can be done in the settings (accessed via the cog icon).

CHOOSE GOOD CONNECTIONS
In 2021, Snapchat rolled out a new safety feature: users can now receive notifications reminding them of the importance of maintaining connections with people they actually know well, as opposed to strangers. This 'Friend Check Up' encourages users to delete connections with users that they rarely communicate with, to maintain their online safety and privacy.

DISCUSS AI
Although My AI's responses can often give the impression that it's a real person, it's essential that young people remember this certainly isn't the case. Encourage your child to think critically about My AI's replies to their questions: are they accurate and reliable? Remind them that My AI shouldn't replace chatting with their real friends, and that it's always better to talk to an actual person in relation to medical matters.

CHAT ABOUT CONTENT
It may feel like an awkward conversation (and one that young people can be reluctant to have) but it's important to talk openly and non-judgementally about sexting. Remind your child that once something's online, the creator loses control over where it ends up - and who else sees it. Likewise, it's vital that children understand that some challenges which become popular on the platform may have potentially harmful consequences.

KEEP ACCOUNTS PRIVATE
Profiles are private by default, but children may make them public to gain more followers. Snap Stories are visible to everyone your child adds, unless they change the settings. On SnapMaps, their location is visible unless Ghost Mode is enabled (again via settings). It's safest not to add people your child doesn't know in real life - especially since the addition of My Places, which allows other Snapchat users to see where your child regularly visits and checks in.

BE READY TO BLOCK AND REPORT
If a stranger does connect with your child on Snapchat and begins to make them feel uncomfortable through bullying, pressure to send explicit images or by sending sexual images to them, your child can select the three dots on that person's profile and report or block them. There are options to state why they're reporting that user (annoying or malicious messages, spam, masquerading as someone else, for example).

Meet Our Expert
Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.

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