

Welcome to this week's SMRT safeguarding update...

WAKE UP WEDNESDAY

WhatsApp Guidance

Welcome back to Term 4! We hope that students have had a good break and that they are feeling refreshed. With many students keeping in touch via social media and messaging services, we are offering some key information about WhatsApp for Parents and Carers. Please note that the user age limit for WhatsApp was lowered by Meta from 16+ to 13+ in April 2024.

Alongside snapchat, WhatsApp is the most popular form of messaging service that teenagers use in the UK. While parents and carers of students at SMRT make their own choice about whether their children use the App, many of the friendship issues that occur between young people happen online.

According to Ofcom's most recent Media Use and Attitudes Report, roughly 55% of 3-17-year-olds in the UK are using WhatsApp as their primary messaging service. Not only does that make WhatsApp the most popular messaging platform among children and young people in the UK; it also means that of the app's approximately three billion users, over seven million of them are British youngsters – keeping in touch with friends and family, but also being exposed to its various risks

What is WhatsApp?

WhatsApp started out as a text messaging service in 2009. It quickly gained in popularity due to the fact users can send messages through an internet connection, rather than having to use up credit, or rely on a mobile signal.

The latest Status feature update allows users to share photos and videos with their contacts. Similar to other photo and video sharing apps, users can add text, stickers and drawings to their photos and videos to personalise them. Once added to a user's Status, other contacts can view it for up to 24 hours.

Privacy

There are several privacy options a user can choose from, to take more control over which people or groups can see their status post. Access this feature by clicking the 'Privacy' tab in the top left corner of the Status page.

Groups users can share their Status with include:

- My Contacts – Status available to all contacts added on WhatsApp
- My Contacts Except... – Status available to all contacts except those selected by the user
- Only Share With ... – Status only available to contacts selected by the user

While this feature is an easy way to control who gets to see a post initially, it's important for young people to remember that anyone who does see images on a Status has the opportunity to take a screen shot and re-share it elsewhere. Our core message to young people is to think before you post, to consider where a post might end up, and who might see it.

Reporting and blocking

In recent updates, WhatsApp switched to providing end-to-end encryption. This means that only the users communicating with each other – nobody else in between, including WhatsApp – are able to see any text, photos or videos shared either in a message or in a Status.

This move was made with privacy in mind. Due to the fact WhatsApp cannot look at messages or posts, there are further actions users need to take in order to report abusive, inappropriate or illegal content.

Access the report page by choosing:

- 'Settings' > 'About and Help' > 'Contact Us'

There is an option on the app to attach a screenshot so that WhatsApp can see the content being reported. WhatsApp's website states "This feature is primarily for reporting problematic content on the app as WhatsApp do not have the contents of messages available to them, which limits their ability to verify the report and take action."

Due to the limits imposed by end-to-end encryption, WhatsApp encourages users to contact appropriate law enforcement if they, or another user, is at risk of emotional or physical harm and to also share any screenshots and other details with them.

WhatsApp does provide the ability to block contacts, so they are unable to make future contact with you. This can be done through the app, by choosing:

- 'Settings' > 'Account' > 'Privacy' > 'Blocked'

Tools to stay safe

Online communication and interaction are fun and important parts of young people's lives, so it is vital we equip them with the knowledge and behaviour to keep themselves safe. Childnet suggest the following advice to discuss with young people:

- Only accept/add contacts who you know and trust in the offline world
- Think before you post and remember that things you post privately could potentially end up being shared publicly
- Keep personal information private
- Be a good friend and show respect and kindness online
- Talk to a trusted adult if anything worries you or upsets you online

How to make a report

If you need to make a report about any issues that have happened online, please use the link below for guidance and please let us know as a safeguarding team so that we can offer support to the student.

<https://www.childnet.com/help-and-advice/how-to-make-a-report/>

How to report an online issue to the police

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/ceop-reporting/>

As always, if you have any immediate concerns about safeguarding issues, students, or the school site, please get in touch via:

safeguarding@smrt.bristol.sch.uk

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about WHATSAPP



WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

With more than two billion active users, WhatsApp is the world's most popular messaging service. Its end-to-end encryption only allows messages to be viewed by the sender and any recipients: not even WhatsApp itself can read them. The UK's Online Safety Bill proposes to end such encryption on private messaging, but for the time being, this controversial feature remains.

EVOLVING SCAMS

WhatsApp's popularity makes it a lucrative hunting ground for scammers. Recent examples include posing as the target's child, requesting a money transfer because of a spurious 'emergency' – plus a scam where fraudsters trigger a verification message by attempting to log in to your account, then (posing as WhatsApp) call or text to ask you to repeat the code back to them, giving them access.

CONTACT FROM STRANGERS

To start a chat, someone only needs the mobile number of the WhatsApp user they want to message. Therefore, if a child has ever given their number out to someone they don't know, that person could then contact them via WhatsApp. It's also possible that the child might be added to a group chat or community (by one of their friends, for example) containing other people they don't know.

FAKE NEWS

WhatsApp's connectivity and ease of use allow news to be shared rapidly – whether it's true or not. To combat the spread of misinformation, messages forwarded more than five times on the app now display a "Forwarded many times" label and a double arrow icon. This makes users aware that the message they've just received is far from an original... and might not be entirely factual, either.

CHAT LOCK AND SECRET CODES

In 2023, WhatsApp introduced a feature that lets users keep their chats in a separate 'locked chats' folder, saved behind their phone's passcode, fingerprint or face ID. There is an additional feature – 'Secret Code' – where users set a unique password for locked chats. Unfortunately, this creates the potential for young people to hide conversations and content they suspect their parents wouldn't approve of.

VIEW ONCE CONTENT

The ability to send images or messages that can only be viewed once has led to some WhatsApp users sharing inappropriate material or abusive texts, knowing that the recipient can't reopen them later to use as evidence of misconduct. People used to be able to screenshot this disappearing content – but a recently added WhatsApp feature now blocks this, citing protection of privacy.

VISIBLE LOCATION

WhatsApp's Live Location feature lets users share their current whereabouts, which can be helpful for friends meeting up or parents checking that their child is safe while out, for example. However, anyone in a user's contacts list or in a mutual group chat can also track their location – potentially letting strangers identify a child's home address or journeys that they make regularly.

Advice for Parents & Educators

EMPHASISE CAUTION

Encourage children to treat unexpected messages with caution: get them to consider whether it sounds like something a friend or relative would really send them. Make sure they know never to share personal details over WhatsApp, and to be wary of clicking on any links in messages. Setting up two-step verification adds a further layer of protection to their WhatsApp account.

ADJUST THE SETTINGS

It's wise to change a child's WhatsApp settings to specify which of their contacts can add them to group chats without needing approval. You can give permission to My Contacts or My Contacts Except... Additionally, if a child needs to use Live Location, emphasise that they should enable this function for only as long as they need – and then turn it off.

CHAT ABOUT PRIVACY

Check in with the child about how they're using WhatsApp, making sure they know you only have their safety at heart. If you spot a Locked Chats folder, you might want to talk about the sort of content they've stored in there, who they're talking to, and why they want to keep these chats hidden. Also, if children send any View Once content, it could be helpful to ask them why.

DISCUSS GROUP CHATS

Make children aware that there could be members of a group that they don't know well and that words can be misinterpreted. Encourage them to leave a good impression, to avoid joining in if conversations turn towards bullying, and to respond to such situations in an appropriate way. Make sure they know that it's OK to leave a group chat if it makes them uncomfortable – or for any reason, in fact.

THINK BEFORE SHARING

Help children understand why it's important to stop and think before posting or forwarding something on WhatsApp. It's easy – and all too common – for content that a user posts to be shared more widely, even publicly on social media. Encourage children to consider how an impulsive message or forwarding might damage their reputation or upset a friend who sent something to them in confidence.

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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