



10 June 2024

IMPORTANT E-SAFETY NOTICE FOR PARENTS

WhatsApp

Dear Parents and Carers,

We are writing to you to provide information about the WhatsApp chat application. This app can be accessed through a mobile phone or tablet device and should not be used by anyone under the age of 13. This app allows you to send messages, images and videos to other contacts.

13+ is the minimum age for using this application.

As an academy, we teach the Computing National Curriculum, which includes teaching children to use technology safely, respectfully and responsibly. This includes knowing what acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is and reporting concerns about content and contact.

However, throughout the year there have been several E-Safety incidents, involving our children but occurring outside of school. These have mainly been related to the misuse of WhatsApp where children are part of underage group chats. **We strongly advise you to remove WhatsApp and access to chat groups involving other children.** We also advise that you regularly monitor what your child is viewing online, and that they must tell you if they receive anything inappropriate.

We will continue to teach children how to 'be safe online' how to be kind and respectful to others. However, to prevent further misuse of the WhatsApp by underage children, please **regularly monitor your child's internet use.** This includes what content they are viewing on all social media platforms.

As parents / carers it is your responsibility to ensure your child is only accessing age-appropriate apps and you are aware of what they are accessing on social media platforms. If you would like any support or advice on how to support your child, then please contact the academy, where a member of our Designated Safeguarding Team will be able to advise you.

On the reverse of this letter, you will find a WhatsApp parent's guide from;

www.nationalonlinesafety.com

This contains useful information about the app and some top tips for managing your child's usage. The website provides information on a range of social media, including acceptable age ratings and parental guidance.

Thank you for your support on this important matter.

Norwich Road Academy Safeguarding Team



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At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about WHATSAPP

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.

AGE RESTRICTION 13+

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

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 that 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 that they don't know.

CHAT LOCK
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 authentication. They subsequently developed an additional feature – 'Secret Code' – where users set a unique password for their locked chats. Unfortunately, this function creates the potential for young people to hide conversations and content they suspect their parents wouldn't approve of (such as age-inappropriate material).

COMMUNITIES AND GROUPS
A community is a collection of related groups on WhatsApp. They can consist of thousands of users. Communities can often be used by scammers to target large groups, hoping someone clicks on their link or responds to their requests. In communities and groups, there are multiple ongoing conversations, which results in pressure to respond. Members – even if they are not each other's contacts – will be able to see any messages sent into the group.

'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 re-open 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.

FAKE NEWS
WhatsApp's connectivity and ease of use allows 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.

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.

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.

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.

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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Sources: <https://blog.whatsapp.com/en-esp-letor> | <https://t2.whatsapp.com/107709836582332> | <https://blog.whatsapp.com/en-esp-letor> | <https://www.whatsapp.com/security> | <https://blog.whatsapp.com/chat-lock-making-your-most-intimate-conversations-more-private> | <https://www.aura.com/en/whatsapp-scams>

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