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

AGE RESTRICTION 13+

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

WhatsApp is a free messaging service owned by Meta which allows users to send text and voice messages, make video calls, share multimedia – such as images, videos, documents and polls – and have group chats. WhatsApp messages are encrypted, meaning only the sender and the recipient can view what is sent. While this privacy may sound attractive on paper, this app comes with several associated risks that must be considered – especially for younger users.

GROUP CHATS

Group chats let friends talk together but can pose problems for young users. They might feel excluded – like discovering events they weren't invited to. Hurtful comments can also escalate quickly, as more people join in, amplifying the impact through a wider audience.

EVOLVING SCAMS

WhatsApp's popularity makes it attractive to scammers. Tactics include impersonating a child in an 'emergency' to request money, or triggering a login code, then pretending to be WhatsApp and asking for it – giving them access to private messages and personal data.

CHANNELS

'Channels' let users follow topics anonymously, interacting only through polls or emoji reactions. However, fake channels can mimic real ones, spreading misinformation, hate speech, or phishing for personal data. WhatsApp may also collect and share channel-following info with third parties, raising privacy issues.

DISAPPEARING MESSAGES

Disappearing messages help share sensitive info, but young people may wrongly assume they're fully private. Senders can opt for their message to vanish after 24 hours, 7 days, or 90 days – or for media, after one view. However, recipients can still save them by bookmarking or taking screenshots, reducing their privacy.

FAKE NEWS

WhatsApp's simplicity makes sharing news quick – accurate or not. To help curb misinformation, messages forwarded over five times now show a 'Forwarded many times' label with a double arrow. This alerts users that the message isn't original and may be unreliable.

CHAT LOCK

The new 'Chat lock' feature lets users store specific messages in a separate passcode- or biometrically-protected folder. While useful for privacy, it could be misused by younger users to hide conversations or content they know parents and educators might find inappropriate, including age-restricted material.

VISIBLE LOCATION

WhatsApp's 'live location' feature helps friends meet up or parents check a child's route home. However, anyone in a child's group chats can track their location, potentially revealing their home address or regular travel patterns to strangers.

AI INTEGRATION

Meta AI on WhatsApp poses risks to children, including exposure to misinformation, inappropriate content, and data privacy issues. AI responses may be inaccurate, and kids might share personal information unknowingly. It can also hinder critical thinking by offering ready-made answers.

Advice for Parents & Educators

EMPHASISE CAUTION

Encourage children to treat unexpected messages with caution. Get them to consider, for example, 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.

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 sent to one user to then be shared more widely, and even publicly on social media. Encourage them to consider how an ill-judged message might damage their reputation or upset a friend who sent something to them in confidence.

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. To do this, go to 'Privacy', then 'Groups'. You can give permission to 'My Contacts' or 'My Contacts Except...'. Additionally, if the 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

Have a conversation with youngsters about how they're using WhatsApp, emphasising that it's for their own safety. If you spot a 'Locked Chats' folder, you might want to talk about the sort of messages that are in there, who they're with and why they have been hidden. Also, if a young user has sent any 'view once' content, discuss their reasons for using this feature.

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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