# What is Snapchat?

Snapchat is a popular photo-messaging app that allows users to take photos, record videos, add drawings and send them to their friends. A message on Snapchat only appears for a few seconds, but once you click away or the time limit expires, it disappears permanently.

Snapchat has a number of different features. These include 'stories' that disappear after 24 hours; 'memories' that act as a kind of personal archive; 'Snap Maps' that share your location whilst you're online; 'streaks' when you send messages back and forth for several consecutive days, and filters.

There is also a 'live streaming' option, in which you create a story with other users based on your location. This is only available when your geo-location is enabled.

## What do parents need to be aware of?

Age restrictions

- Snapchat states that young people under the age of 13 years are not able to create an account. However, there is no strict age verification in place when signing up to the app, allowing underage children to sign up by giving a false date of birth.

Privacy settings

- By default, only 'Friends' can make direct contact or view a user's story. However, users can change their profile to 'public', which means that anyone can view your stories and Snapchat users you haven't added will be able to send you images and messages.
- In August 2022 Snapchat introduced their '**Family Center**', an in-app tool that allows parents to see who their children have been speaking to (and how frequently they communicate). The Family Center will not, however, reveal the content of any messages.

Inappropriate content

- Because of the 'disappearing' effect of images, Snapchat has been used for sharing inappropriate images. The momentary nature of Snapchat can mean that young people may be more inclined to take images on impulse that they might later regret.
- It's important to remember that images can be screen-shotted or recorded with another device, perhaps against the wishes of the sender.
- Like many other apps, there is a concern that strangers can contact young people directly by sending images and requesting to become 'friends'. You can set the privacy settings so that you can only receive Snapchats from 'friends' rather than 'Everyone'.

Geolocation

- Snap Maps allows snapchat 'friends' to see where your child is. The locations are quite accurate, even revealing the street you're on.
- Snap Maps is switched to 'off' by default, but when you set it up you have the option to choose between four different settings: 'ghost mode', which means no one can see your location, 'friends', which includes all your current friends and whoever you friend in the future, 'only these friends', which allows you to set up a list of friends who can see your location, and 'friends, except...' which allows you to set up a list within your friends who won't be able to see your location.
- It is advisable that geo-location should be kept private by disabling location for Snapchat in settings or switching on 'ghost mode'.

Artificial intelligence

- In 2023 Snapchat announced that their AI chatbot 'My AI' would be made **freely available to all users**. Like other AI chatbots, users can 'chat' to My AI – asking it all sorts of questions they'd like answers to, requesting custom-made images and visual content, and even asking for cooking recipes based on a picture of bits they've got in the fridge.
- Although tools like AI chatbots have lots of great uses, they're a technology that's rapidly developing and they definitely aren't risk-free. Younger users might be provided age-inappropriate answers to questions they ask, and the image-creation tools of My AI could be used for things like bullying and harassment.

- If you're happy with your child using Snapchat without the My AI feature it's possible to delete the chatbot. This can be done by selecting the 'My AI' user, tapping 'Chat Settings', and then tapping 'Clear from Chat Feed'. Note however that it may be possible for children to redownload My AI.

Reporting functions
- You can report users that breach the Community Guidelines by **contacting Snapchat directly.** If you have any concerns about grooming, sexual abuse or exploitation on Snapchat, you can also file a report with **CEOP**.

## What is WhatsApp?

WhatsApp is a free app that allows users to send encrypted messages to other users, so long as they have an internet connection. It is available on all major mobile operating systems. Users must verify their account with a standard mobile number to start using the app. WhatsApp offers users the ability to send images, voice notes and a wide range of emojis, in addition to voice and video calls.

## What do parents need to be aware of?

Age restrictions
- In Europe and the UK, the minimum age of use for WhatsApp is 16 years old. It had previously dropped to 13 years old but in April 2018 returned to 16, as a response to data-protection legislation. Like many age restrictions on social media apps, some children may choose to ignore this and sign up for WhatsApp when they're younger.
- WhatsApp's main purpose is to send messages to friends. It isn't public in the same way that Twitter is, and people can only message friends who are already added on their phone. As long as a child only has trusted people as contacts on their phone, it is a relatively safe social media app.
- The main thing to discuss with them is how to act in group chats, because people who are not in their contacts will be able to see all the messages and send them messages.

Group chats
- The group chat function allows up to 512 people to chat in one conversation stream. Each group is set up by one person, known as the group admin, who is the only person who can add or remove participants and change or add further group administrators.
- Anybody in the group, even if they're not one of your phone contacts, will be able to see messages that you post, and you will be able to see theirs. If you are added to a group with someone you have blocked, that person will still be able to contact you in the group chat.
- You can't always control if you're added to a group chat; but remind children that they can always control their own participation within it – they can leave whenever they want to.  To do this, when on the group's page, tap the three dots in the top right (or the name of the group at the top of the screen on an iPhone), then tap Group info, then EXIT GROUP in the red box at the bottom of the screen (or scroll down to Exit Group on an iPhone).

'View Once' messages
- WhatsApp also allows you to send images and videos which can only be viewed once, and this can be done by tapping the 'View Once' button on the image or video you wish to send. All photos and videos sent this way won't be saved to the recipients photo library.

Edited messages
- In May 2023 WhatsApp announced that they would be introducing the ability for users to easily **edit their messages** for up to 15 minutes after sending.
- Although messages which have been changed will be accompanied by an 'edited' note next to them, users will no longer be able to see what the message said previously.
- WhatsApp haven't announced if the platform themselves will keep a history of edits. If there's no way of seeing the previous content of a message (besides a screenshot at the time of receiving the message) then this will mean that it's more difficult to have evidence of messages which are harassing or involve bullying.  It may also mean that children are more prone to send a hurtful message if they believe they can quickly edit it afterwards (and avoid repercussions).

End-to-end Encryption

- WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption in all its users' communications. This means that only those with access to the phones of the sender and receiver of a message conversation between the two can access them. This has caused problems for law enforcement agencies when trying to access the communication records of suspects. However, it is an attractive feature for those concerned about the privacy of their messages.

Privacy settings

- The app has a default privacy setting which allows anyone else on WhatsApp to view the user's profile photo, status and when they last used the app. It's easy to change this setting to specify that the WhatsApp profile is only seen by 'My contacts' or 'Nobody' making the app feel a lot safer for younger users. You can also manage any blocked contacts.
- In August 2022, WhatsApp announced some **additional privacy features**, including the ability to leave group chats 'silently' without notifying other members (excluding admins), extra control over who sees your 'online status', and the blocking of screenshots for View Once messages.

Reporting and blocking

- There is no direct way to report a user, or specific abuse, other than to block them from sending you further messages. To block a contact, when the conversation is open, click on the 3 dots on the top right, tap 'More', then 'Block'.
- Blocked contacts won't be able to see your profile information, and they won't be able to contact you. To permanently delete a contact from WhatsApp, you'll need to delete them from the contacts on your phone.
- Full safety details for WhatsApp can be found **in their FAQs**. This can be from spamming to abusive or inappropriate content or behaviour. However, WhatsApp reminds users that If they feel that they or someone else is in emotional or physical danger, they should contact your local law enforcement authorities.
- If you're concerned that a child may have experienced abuse whilst using WhatsApp, you can file a report with CEOP **here**.