What Parents & Carers Need to Know about

SNAPCHAT

Snapchat is a photo- and video-sharing app which also allows users to chat with friends via text or audio. Users can share images and videos with specific friends, or through a ‘story’ (documenting the previous 24 hours) to their entire friend list. Snapchat usage rose during the pandemic, with many young people utilising it to connect with their peers. The app continues to develop features to engage an even larger audience and emulate current trends, rivaling platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

CONNECTING WITH STRANGERS

Even if your child only connects on the app with people they know, they may still receive friend requests from strangers. Snapchat's links with apps such as TikTok and Instagram has increased this possibility. Accepting a friend request means that children are then disclosing personal information through the story, Snap Map and Spotlight features. This could allow predators to gain their trust for sinister purposes.

EXCESSIVE USE

There are many features that are attractive to users and keep them excited about the app. Snap streaks encourage users to check in hourly, Snap Maps give users a chance to check in and report speed, Snapchat challenges give users the chance to obtain money and online fame, and the Snapchat feature's scroll of images makes it easy for children to spend hours watching content.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Some videos and posts on Snapchat are not suitable for children. The hashtags used to group content are determined by the hashtags used in the search, which can mean that innocent search terms could still yield age-inappropriate results. The app's Discover feature is often cluttered with snippets of news stories and trending articles that often include adult content. There is no easy way to turn off this feature.

Advice for Parents & Carers

TURN OFF QUICK ADD

The Quick Add function helps people find each other on the app. This function is a way for people to connect through social media, but it may also be a way for people to connect with strangers. The app’s Discover feature is often cluttered with snippets of news stories and trending articles that often include adult content. There is no easy way to turn off this feature.

CHOOSE GOOD CONNECTIONS

Snapchat has recently announced that it is rolling out a new safety feature: users will 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 who rarely communicate with them, to maintain their online safety and privacy.

KEEP ACCOUNTS PRIVATE

Profiles are private by default, but children may make them public to gain more followers. Your child can send images directly to friends, but stories are visible to everyone they have added, unless they change the settings. If they use Snap Map, their location is visible unless “Ghost Mode” is enabled (again via settings). It’s prudent to emphasise the importance of not adding people they don’t know in real life. This is particularly important with the addition of My Places, which allows other Snapchatters to see the places your child regularly visits and checks in: strangers, bullies and acquaintances could use this information to engage in conversation and arrange to meet in person.

SEXTING

Sexting continues to be a risk associated with Snapchat. The app’s disappearing messages feature makes it easy for young people (teenagers in particular) to share explicit images without an impulse. While these pictures do disappear, the sender is notified if it has been screenshot. Furthermore, users have found alternative methods to share images, such as taking pictures with a separate device.

DAMAGE TO CONFIDENCE

Snapchat’s filters and lenses are a popular way for users to enhance their “selfie” game, but users often create exaggerated expectations and create feelings of inadequacy. Comparing themselves unfavourably against other Snapchat users could threaten a child’s confidence or sense of self-worth.

VISIBLE LOCATION

My Places lets users check in and search for popular spots nearby – such as restaurants, bars and shopping centres – and connect and recommend them to their friends. The potential issue with this is that it allows for consistent checking into locations on the app, giving others access to the other users in their friends list (even people they have never even met) as to where they currently are and where they regularly go.

Advice for Parents & Carers

TALK ABOUT EXCITING

It may feel like an awkward conversation (and one that young people can be reluctant to have) but it is important to talk openly and non-judgmentally about these issues. Discuss the legal implications of sending, receiving or sharing explicit images, as well as the possible emotional impact. Emphasise that your child should never feel pressured to send or receive explicit images, and that if they receive unwanted images, they should tell a trusted adult straight away.

TALK ABOUT EXCITING

BE READY TO BLOCK AND REPORT

If your child is not comfortable with their privacy settings on Snapchat, or their child is not comfortable with Snapchat, you can select the three dots on that person’s profile and choose report or block. There are options to state why they are reporting or blocking (annoying or malicious messages, spam, or harassing someone else, for example).

Meet Our Expert

Dr Clare Nuttall 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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