



GO-TO GUIDE



Let's all find safer ways to communicate with young people on WhatsApp!

What is WhatsApp?

WhatsApp is an instant messaging and video calling app. It can be downloaded and used for free. Users can send text, voice and video messages, make voice and video calls, share images, documents, videos, gifs, links and user locations. It can be used to send individuals messages but is popular for its group chat function. Multiple contacts can be added to a group chat where everyone can share messages and chats can be named so they're easily identifiable.

Good to know:

- the minimum age to use WhatsApp in the UK is 13 (this was updated in April 2024 to be consistent with WhatsApp's minimum age requirements globally)
- WhatsApp messages are end-to-end encrypted – which means that no one but the people who send and receive the message can see it or retrieve it, not even WhatsApp
- voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), also known as IP telephony, is a method and group of technologies for voice calls for the delivery of voice communication sessions over Internet Protocol (IP) networks, such as the Internet

How is WhatsApp used in sports clubs, community groups and physical activities?

- to communicate details of group sessions such as, timings, who's playing, what kit or equipment is needed and venue details or directions
- to share updates, results and details of ongoing matches, competition, events or tournaments
- to share messages, images, videos, emoji's, gifs, documents and sharing a person's live location



Why is WhatsApp often chosen over other apps?

- easy to set up an account and to create groups (no complex logon progresses required)
- user-friendly and easy to use
- free
- young people use it
- it can be used on the go and wherever you are
- privacy isn't compromised (due to end-to-end encryption)

The downsides

- There are some disadvantages to using WhatsApp, due to the fast-paced, reactive nature of the app, it doesn't allow for much thinking time about what information is shared.
- You as organisers or hosts can't control what others post. However, the group admin for the chat can delete other people's messages, videos or images. The person who's sent the message can also remove the message from the chat, but it will only delete it for themselves and not the whole group.
- Contacts can be removed from chats or blocked but it won't prevent inappropriate behaviour before it happens, so it's often used as an afterthought.
- Disappearing messages can be set to disappear after 24 hours, so unless the group is monitored closely, inappropriate messages could fly under the radar.
- The 'read once' feature allows a message or image to be sent and then to automatically delete once it has been seen. This can encourage some people to send abusive or upsetting messages or images.
- Phone numbers are viewable by all users in chats. This has the potential to leave young people vulnerable to abuse from adults and leaders, with an opportunity to communicate one-on-one. Or it could open up the potential for peer-on-peer bullying, with new groups being set up to victimise or exclude a particular young person.

- Live locations could be seen as a positive and a negative! It may help to share a live location to ensure everyone is in the right place and to prevent getting lost. However, there is an obvious risk of children sharing their location with others outside of specific situations.
- Not everyone has a smart phone, or internet access to use WhatsApp, so they would be excluded from potentially important information.

The positives

- WhatsApp has many advantages for its users. It's fun, fast, free, easy to use and share information with your contacts.
- You can invite people to join your WhatsApp group chat, which can be access controlled by a group administrator
- You can also directly communicate with young people, parents and carers, quickly and efficiently, on a platform that young people use and understand.
- Read receipts show you quickly and easily who has or hasn't seen the information you have shared (by displaying two small blue ticks).
- Information can be sent on the go and directly to your group and responded to quickly too.

Important to know:

Coaches and leaders should not be messaging any children or young people directly on an individual WhatsApp chat.





End-to-end encryption possible safeguarding concerns

Encrypted messages pose a risk to young people, as only the people within the chat can read and listen to the messages. This could be a potential safeguarding concern, as it can be a route for individuals to bully or “gang up” on someone else.

This level of security could also be used to share messages, images and gifs which could potentially be inappropriate, with little to no accountability to outside agencies under the circumstances of an investigation. Also, WhatsApp can not be monitored for illegal activity.

Good to know:

There are other apps that have similar functions to WhatsApp, two of the most popular are Signal and Telegram and children often use Discord for similar purposes.

Possible safeguarding concerns and risks to consider

- only the people within the group can see the information shared – so it’s important to have a least 2 trusted adults as leads for your WhatsApp group who are accountable to each other, your codes of conduct and safeguarding procedures
- possibility for inappropriate messages, images and videos to be shared
- possibility of bullying (cyberbullying) or grooming behaviour taking place
- the ‘read once’ feature, allows a message or image to be sent and then to automatically delete once it has been seen. This can encourage some people to send abusive or upsetting messages or images.
- disappearing messages (which disappear after 24 hours) unless the group is monitored closely could go unnoticed
- live locations could be shared in the group showing a young person’s live location





Thinking about setting up a WhatsApp group with young people? Here's what you need to think about...

This example from Noah will help you think about the kinds of processes you'll need to put in place in your group to make it as safe as possible for young people.

Noah is setting up a WhatsApp group for a group of young skateboarders. There's a big national 2-day competition coming up and young people need to know the arrangements for this event. Details such as travel arrangements to and from the venue, which is located 2 hours away, need to be shared. As the competition is a 2-day event, accommodation is required, so information regarding this also needs to be confirmed to all members and their parents or carers.

Noah has asked for parents or carers permission to add young people to a new WhatsApp group. They have researched WhatsApp and understand how to use it, including how to delete messages, how to invite new people to the group and block members if necessary.

Noah has asked the young people that wish to be part of the WhatsApp group to sign up to a [code of conduct](#) and a [safer use policy](#). They have also drafted some rules on the use and acceptable behaviours (codes of conduct) as the first post in the group chat.

Noah will have an 'in-person' discussion with the parents and young people about using WhatsApp safely and the codes or conduct. They will do this as a group at a training session prior to the event.

He has considered what to name the chat, so it's easily identifiable to reduce the potential for mistake or human error posting. They have asked their colleague Fran, to help monitor the chat, so there are a couple of staff members supervising the group chat. Fran is also DBS checked and has been [safely recruited](#) to the role, just like Noah.

Noah and Fran have a basic level of safeguarding training and understand the groups safeguarding reporting procedures. They've also signed up to a code of conduct for staff, and read the groups online safety policy.

They have invited parents to this group chat and have made sure they are also aware of, and have signed-up to, a code of conduct for parents and a safer use policy/online safety policy.

Young people have been sign-posted to online safety information and resources, which included how to remove the app if needed, [Childnet](#), [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) and [Childline](#) for online safety and social media guidance and support. Noah has told the young people, parents and carers, who to go to if they experience bullying or feel uncomfortable with anything in the chat, have any concerns or worries or need help.

Safer WhatsApp checklist

Use this handy printable checklist when setting up your own WhatsApp group for young people to make sure you're doing everything you can to keep them safe.

We have...

Researched WhatsApp and understand how to use it.	
Sought permission to add young people to a new WhatsApp group (from both the young person and their parent or carer).	
Asked young people, parents and carers to sign up to codes of conduct and a safer use policy/online safety policy.	
Considered the name of our group chat carefully.	
Ensured we have at least 2 staff members or volunteers who are part of the WhatsApp group to have responsibility and are trained to monitor and moderate the group chat. These individuals are: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• DBS checked• understand the app and the risks• have safeguarding training• understand our safeguarding procedures• know what's expected from them through our staff code of conduct, safeguarding policy and online safety policy.	
Invited parents to the group or have created a separate group for parents and carers and considered the advantages and disadvantages of both options.	
Signposted young people to helpful resources, websites and support (for online safety and social media usage).	
Let young people, parents and carers know who they can go to if they have any worries, concerns or need any help.	

Make sure you print out these wallet cards for parents and young people too!

