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+
In the UK

WhatsApp is a free messaging app owned by Meta, that allows users to send messages, share multimedia, make calls, and participate in group chats. In September 2026, WhatsApp announced new optional parental controls for teenagers, including privacy settings, group notifications, and restrictions on AI content, which parents and educators should be aware of.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

GROUP CHAT PRESSURES

Group chats help young people stay connected, but they can also leave them feeling excluded or overwhelmed. Negative comments can escalate quickly, and frequent notifications can create a sense of needing to be constantly available. WhatsApp's new parental controls notify parents when teenagers join or leave groups, or when a group grows significantly in size.

HARMFUL CONTENT ON CHANNELS

WhatsApp Channels allow users to receive updates from public figures, organisations, and content creators; however, some Channels may expose young people to misinformation, harmful ideologies, or age-inappropriate material. New optional parental controls allow adults to restrict which Channels teenagers access, including limiting them to approved Channels.

SCAMS TARGETING YOUNG USERS

Scammers may use WhatsApp to trick young people into sharing personal information, sending money, or sharing security codes. They may impersonate friends or family members, using convincing stories about emergencies or urgent requests for help. New parental controls can help manage who contacts teenagers; however, they cannot prevent all scams or fraudulent messages.

UNWANTED CONTACT AND LOCATION SHARING

WhatsApp allows users to share their live location, profile information, and Status updates. Without appropriate privacy settings, this information could expose young people to unwanted attention or reveal their whereabouts. New parental controls enable adults to manage certain privacy settings, including who can view account details and add teenagers to groups.

DISAPPEARING AND HIDDEN MESSAGES

WhatsApp features such as disappearing messages and Chat Lock can make conversations harder for adults to identify. Although these tools are designed to protect privacy, they may also make it harder for adults to recognise inappropriate exchanges or harmful behaviour. WhatsApp's new parental controls do not give adults access to teenagers' private messages or calls.

COMMERCIAL AND AI CONTENT

WhatsApp includes advertising in parts of its Updates section and offers Meta AI, an integrated AI assistant. Young people may encounter sponsored content, misleading AI responses, or information which is unsuitable for their age. New parental controls offer a stricter 'Limited Content' setting for Meta AI; however, this cannot guarantee that every response will be accurate or appropriate.

Advice for Parents & Educators

EXPLORE NEW PARENTAL CONTROLS

WhatsApp's new optional parental controls are being rolled out gradually, giving families more ways to manage teenagers' privacy and interactions. Teenagers will need parental approval using a parent-set PIN to relax any protected settings. Keep the conversation open and set up the controls together, remembering that parents can adjust or switch them off at any time.

MANAGE CHANNELS AND AI

Explore the new settings for Channels, Status updates, and Meta AI. Parents can restrict Channels to approved selections or prevent teenagers from viewing them. They can also choose Meta AI's stricter 'Limited Content' option, which restricts certain topics. Remind young people that AI can produce inaccurate information and encourage them to question responses rather than accepting them at face value.

MONITOR GROUP ACTIVITY SAFELY

New parental controls notify adults when teenagers join or leave groups, or when a group grows significantly in size. These alerts can help identify potentially concerning interactions without revealing private messages. Encourage young people to discuss unfamiliar groups, uncomfortable conversations, or pressure from other members and that they can leave, mute, or report if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

PRIORITISE TRUST AND COMMUNICATION

Parental controls should support conversations about online safety, not replace them. Explain that WhatsApp's new features do not give adults access to private messages or calls, helping teenagers understand that their privacy remains protected. Reassure young people that they can speak openly about upsetting content, unwanted contact, or pressure from other group members.

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.

See full reference list on our website

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