

Group Chats

Giving parents and carers everything they need to know about online issues, including insights and experiences direct from young people.

What are group chats?

Group chats are private conversations happening using technology that include more than just two people. You might be familiar with group chats on messaging apps like WhatsApp, but they can also happen on games and social media. Like any conversation, group chats have different purposes including:

- chatting to friends
- asking questions
- large chats for people with similar interests, such as for a concert or fan groups
- messaging family
- passing on information
- planning activities
- sharing photos

Did you know?

In our work in schools, we hear a lot about group chats set up by children for their whole class or year group to use.

Where are young people having group chats?

Young people use different apps for group chats but for many, their first group chats will be on games like Roblox. Often, WhatsApp is seen as for adults and 'work'. For example, family chats or revision groups. For fun, young people use Snapchat, Instagram and Discord.

"I've always found it's been very much Snapchat for, like, play and then WhatsApp for work." Anna, 17

What do young people like about group chats?

- quick and easy communication
- a place to get help from others
- convenient
- don't have to arrange to meet up or all be free at the same time to hang out
- can dip in and out of conversations
- makes it easy to find links and information
- can help you get to know people before an event or working together. For example, before going to college

What are young people's concerns about group chats?

- online bullying including mean messages or arguments breaking out
- subgroups where certain people are excluded and talked about
- memes, language and comments that are hateful like homophobia, misogyny and racism
- pressure to be active and involved in group chats
- FOMO (fear of missing out) when messages are exchanged when they are busy, including late at night
- sharing of personal information
- a pressure to be funny or controversial
- stigma against those who do not participate
- if you step away, the topic can change and move on leaving you behind
- can include distressing or harmful content such as pornography or non-consensual nude image sharing

What strategies are young people using to manage group chats?

Lots of the young people we speak to recognise the challenges of using group chats and are already finding ways to make their experiences more positive. For example:

- using the 'mute' tool to prevent active groups becoming a distraction
- leaving groups they don't want to be part of
- starting new groups if existing ones no longer felt safe
- using settings to prevent people adding them to group chats without permission
- working together to moderate behaviour in chats, for example by having a group admin or issuing warnings to members

Did you know?

Group chats can be of varying sizes and some have hundreds of participants. Young people may be added to group chats with people they know and people they don't.





How can you help?

- Talk to your child about group chats. Start with the positives, but set clear expectations about being kind, respectful and responsible while in group chats.
- Look out for signs that your child's use of technology is impacting their wellbeing. Group chats can be overwhelming, so check in with your child and make sure they know they can always come to you if something is worrying or upsetting them online.
- Discuss how to manage 'online friendships' and contact with people they do not know in person. Strategies like leaving group chats that make them feel uncomfortable, always keeping personal information private, and avoiding chats with unfamiliar 'friends of friends' or 'randomers' are key.
- Familiarise yourself with key settings and support your child to use these too. These could be reporting and blocking tools, muting chats or turning off read receipts.
- Search online for the platforms your child is using with search terms 'privacy settings', 'group chat settings' or 'parental controls' to find the relevant settings available.

Supporting Under 11s

- If your child shows an interest in group chats, remember that most social media apps have an age rating of 13+.
- If your child tells you that all their friends are using group chats, talk to other parents to confirm this, and make a decision that works for you and your family.
- If it's a no, you're not on your own. Many parents prefer to wait until their child is older.
- If it's a yes, supervise and monitor your child's use. Set clear expectations and check in regularly.



Supporting older children and teens

- Spend time with your child ensuring you both know how to use the block and report features, and how to take screenshots (this can help them show you something that may have gone wrong).
- Work together to find a balance that allows you to support and monitor their use of group chats, whilst still giving them some privacy. Expecting to access all their private chats may push your child away or lead to them keeping secrets.

Supporting a 16+ year old

- Remind your child that they do not have guaranteed privacy in group chats. Conversations can easily be saved or shared, and thoughtless messages can impact their reputation with friends and wider, like professionally.
- If your child is using group chats to get to know new people, discuss strategies they can use to keep themselves safe if they choose to meet (meet in a public space, never go alone, share location).



Glossary

admin	a member of a chat who can perform certain actions such as adding or removing other members.
block	a tool available on many platforms to stop a user from interacting with you.
e2e encryption	(end to end encryption) technology that means messages are only visible to the sender and recipient.
left on read	slang referring to someone reading a message that requires a response, but not sending a reply.
moderator	a member of a chat or community who tries to ensure that others are behaving safely or respectfully.
PM (or DM)	a private message (or direct message) that is sent between two people separate from a group chat.
read receipts	a feature of some apps that allows users to see when a message they have sent has been opened or read.
report	a tool available on many platforms that allows a user to escalate an issue to the platform's safety team, usually because it breaks the terms and conditions or community guidelines.
side chat	a separate chat between two or more members of a larger 'main' chat. Often used to discuss or comment on activity in the 'main' chat.