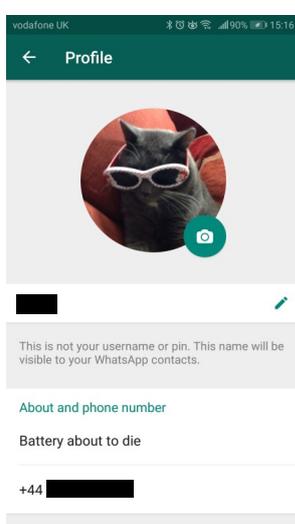




What is WhatsApp?

WhatsApp is a hugely popular messaging service, owned by Facebook. It currently has 1.5 Billion users worldwide. It is available for all popular tablets, phones and can also be installed on laptops and desktop computers. You can add people through the app through their phone number

While the primary function of WhatsApp is to send text messages (similar to SMS on mobile phones), it has a number of other chat features available such as voice and video chat, sending and receiving pictures, videos, voice messages and other files, as well as the ability to create a 'Group' of your friends to share messages with. The app is free to download and allows users to send content to each other by using either a mobile data or Wi Fi connection so, provided that your data limit hasn't been exceeded, there should be no extra cost to use it.



WhatsApp is used by many families to keep in touch with each other through the use of groups and it is becoming popular in schools with many classes and year groups setting up groups to discuss school days, homework and keep in touch during holidays. Each group can contain up to 100 users and users can only be added or removed by the person who has created the group. The app will always notify you when a new message is received, either through a group chat or a direct message but notifications can be turned off.

WhatsApp users are added as a contact using your mobile phone number and allows the ability to invite friends you may be in contact with through other social media apps such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Do age restrictions apply?

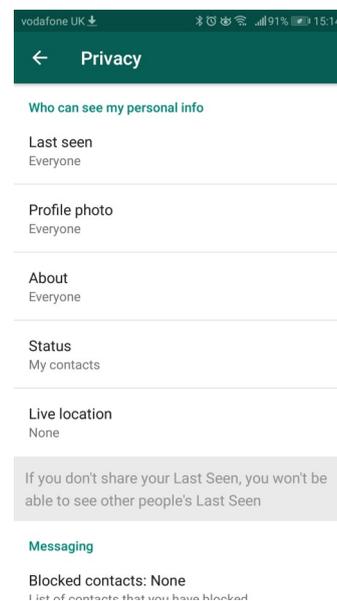
Yes, although this changed in 2018. The current age requirement for WhatsApp is 16+ although it had previously been 13. This was changed due to new data protection legislation enacted in Europe (GDPR) - this is because of some of the information WhatsApp will collect about users such as phone number and information on what device you are using. This age limit does not apply to other social media services.

WhatsApp haven't been clear what will happen to users who have been identified as being under that age but potentially accounts could be disabled as they breach the new terms and conditions of the app.

Are there any privacy settings/controls?

Even though the app is all about messaging, there is still a profile which your friends can see whenever they click on you as a contact. This includes a profile picture, your name, phone number and when you last opened the app. All of this information can be managed by going to the Privacy section under the settings.

WhatsApp now includes a location based service called Live Location with allows you to attach a GPS location to your messages or group chats. This has to be turned on and can be time limited - you can set location sharing to be active for 15 minutes, an hour or 8 hours. It's important to discuss the risk of oversharing information online and question why a location should be added to a message for friends or a group rather than sharing it because others do.





Things to think about

Group Chat

While group chats can be a hugely beneficial feature, it can also cause quite a few problems. A minority of children and young people will use group chats as a way of being disruptive. Many students have spoken of their frustration at individuals who "Spam" the group at inappropriate time – by repeatedly posting messages to the group late at night or early in the morning which leads to disturbed sleep or parents getting frustrated at the number of notifications received. Talk through with your child about social etiquette and the importance of only messaging when appropriate. Ensure that problematic individuals are removed from the group for the benefit of everyone else.

Its also important to note that any users who is added to the group chat will be able to send messages to ALL group members whether they know them or not, also allowing them to see each individuals phone number. This can allow individuals to try to add you on other social media apps you have linked to your phone, or ring or text you so always make sure that your children are careful about who they add or who is added to their group chat. Encourage them to leave the group if they are not happy and to discuss with their friends why they have left to reduce the likelihood of being re-added to the chat.

Managing screen time

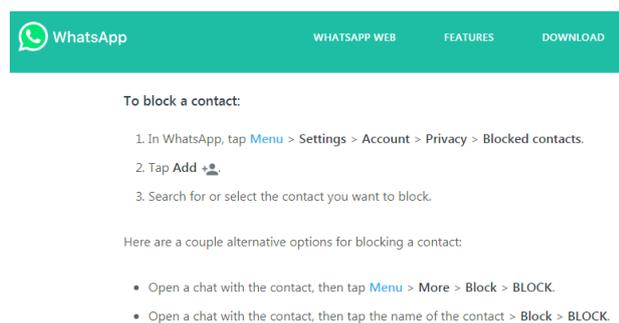
Studies around appropriate screen time (the number of hours we spend using mobile devices) have been inconclusive about the consequences. However, it has been reported through studies and anecdotal evidence that many children and young people have disturbed sleep due to mobile devices and the Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO). Whether it's good or bad, they want to know what is being discussed and worry that if they aren't always available on the app they may be missing something important.

It's vital that children and young people feel able to disconnect safely before bedtime, and parents and carers can help with this. Keeping phones downstairs at bedtimes and setting rules around messaging may get some resistance at first, it can be a great way to force them to detach from the digital world. Discuss some simple rules such as no technology in bedrooms, or at family times or meal times will be hugely beneficial. The hard part is ensuring, as their parents or carers, that we also follow that rule too and set a positive example to show that we are in control of the technology and not the other way round.

Abusive behaviour

As we find with most messaging services, WhatsApp can be used to share both positive and negative messages. It can be used by students to share rumours, threats and images which may cause distress to others. It's important to remember that all services which allow users to interact also give you the ability to block that individual too. Its also worth encouraging our children to screenshot anything they are concerned or upset about and always share that with an adult.

It's important to note that while you may block a user from contacting you directly, this will not apply to group messaging. Anyone you have blocked or who has blocked you will still be able to interact with you through group messaging.



Useful Links

Health impact of screen time— A guide for clinicians and parents

<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/health-impacts-screen-time-guide-clinicians-parents/>

WhatsApp Frequently Asked Questions

<https://faq.whatsapp.com/>

If you have concerns about the immediate safety of a child, you can call Lincolnshire Police on 101 or, in an emergency, dial 999