

WhatsApp group involving students

Whilst there are a wide range of Apps and platforms that young people use to communicate with each other, WhatsApp remains one of the most popular.

In the first instance, it is important to remember that as of April 2024 people must be aged 13 or over to use WhatsApp. WhatsApp will remove accounts of users who are found to be under 13.

This is especially important given that the default WhatsApp settings allow for people to be added to group chats without their consent. We have recently had reports of students being added to group chats by persons unknown who are not part of the College community. One of these chats - named 'add anyone in the UK' - had up to 900 participants and some of the content being shared by people outside of College has been inappropriate, offensive and in some cases possibly in breach of laws against hate speech. There is no evidence of anyone in the College posting or sharing such content but by being added to these groups they are exposed to it.

In addition to this, some children from other schools were sharing photos, videos and in some cases even their locations. Young people may often share what they think are innocent photos or videos of themselves or others, but with current AI technology those images can be manipulated in extremely disturbing ways and sometimes end up circulating on the dark web. By the time someone discovers that their image or identity has been misused the damage is often already done.

Several individuals in the group were also sending clickable links, which can pose significant risks such as malware being installed onto a device that can:

- give strangers access to photos, videos, contacts, payment details, locations
- allow monitoring or tracking of the device
- lead to identity theft or blackmail and more.

There is also a growing issue nationally and globally of sextortion, which is unfortunately becoming increasingly common among young people. This is when a child is tricked or pressured into sharing images or videos and is then threatened or blackmailed. Open groups like this can give predators or criminal groups easy access to vulnerable young people.

We would advise all parents to check their child's WhatsApp settings, in particular in relation to Group Chats. A recent WhatsApp software update has meant that even if settings had been changed to private, they may now have been reset to default. You can review and amend settings as follows:

- Go to Settings > Privacy > Groups
- Select "My contacts" or "My contacts except..."
- Other users who are not in your contacts will then not be able to add you directly to a group and will instead be prompted to send you a private invite through a one-on-one chat, which you have three days to accept. If the person sending the invite is not known to you personally (i.e. not simply via the online world) then you should not accept the invite.