

Instant messaging



i This fact sheet includes information for parents and carers about instant messaging.

What is instant messaging?

Instant messaging (or 'IM') apps are categorised by the ability to send and receive messages in real-time. This is also known as direct messaging ('DM') or private messaging ('PM').

How does it work?

Instant, direct or private messaging allows for a more private conversation to take place between users. For example, **users can communicate in 'private', directly with each other**, rather than on a public wall or forum. Some instant messaging also allows for a group chat where multiple users can be in the same conversation.

Instant messaging apps have expanded beyond being purely text based, with **many apps now featuring video and audio** call capabilities.

Popular examples include KIK, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, Discord and WeChat.

Many platforms, including social networking, gaming, image and video sharing apps, also have an in-built chat function or a complementary messaging service to allow for users to communicate directly. Popular platforms with a complementary direct message feature include Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and TikTok.

What are the challenges?

With the ability to share pictures, messages and videos across various platforms, meeting people and interacting online **can present challenges for safety and wellbeing**. Additionally, many parents or carers may not be aware that the platform their child is using contains a message function.

Interactive platforms such as direct message or chat function can be used by offenders as a **gateway to initiate contact** with children online. Without secure privacy settings, it can be possible for anyone to make contact using direct message.

Some instant messaging apps or functions may have perceived 'anonymity', with limited verification required to create an account or begin using a service. In these situations **it can be difficult to verify another user's identity** and who they say they are.

Instant messaging group chats or conversations might include various users, including people your child may or may not be 'friends' with or be on their contacts list, allowing them to communicate with people they don't really know.

There are also apps which **allow for 'secret' conversations** which means the messages are locked to one device, rather than the account, and sometimes require a password to see them.



Similar to instant messages, content over video chat can be screen captured or recorded sometimes without the other person's knowledge.

Video chats can be unpredictable and content can be surprising, shocking or even inappropriate, particularly if the chat involves people you don't know.



Tips for staying safe.

- **Talk to your child** about their online interactions, who they might be communicating with and how.
- Encourage your child to **question suspicious accounts or users**, as well as unknown, random or unsolicited friend or follower requests.
- **Strong privacy settings**, including limiting direct message functions, can be key to preventing unwanted or inappropriate contact.
- If you aren't sure how an app works, research and download it yourself and learn its features, or sit down with your child and ask them to show you how it works. This can help you understand the potential challenges these apps might have and what precautions to put in place for your child.

- **Report and block inappropriate contact** on the apps, games and sites your child uses, should an issue arise.

Encourage your child to question suspicious accounts or users, as well as unknown, random or unsolicited friend or follower requests.

Getting help

Online child sexual exploitation, including **grooming** and **extortion**, can be reported to the **Childline website and NSPCC** has information and resources to prevent online child sexual exploitation as well as how to report and get help.

If a child is in immediate danger, call the police on 999.

If you become aware of explicit content that has been posted online, including child sexual abuse material, report the site to the NSPCC. They have a range of powers to take action to have content removed.

Childrens Helpline 08001111 is a free, confidential telephone and online counselling service for young people between 5 and 25 years old.

You can call the NSPCC on 02078252505. Contact Helpline on help@NSPCC.org.uk