



Facebook Messenger is a communication and chat application which is part of the wider Facebook platform and has been a standalone app on mobile devices since 2011. Through Messenger, users can exchange messages and send photos, videos, stickers, gifs, audio files and play games. It allows both one-to-one conversations and group chats, has a 'stories' feature and provides the ability to set up a video call session with up to 50 people at a time through its latest update, Messenger Rooms. That's why we've created this guide to help parents and carers understand exactly what Facebook Messenger is all about.



What parents need to know about FACEBOOK MESSENGER



ADDICTIVE NATURE

Whereas Messenger is integrated into Facebook itself on a desktop or laptop, it is a separate app on mobile phones. It is similar in many ways to other messaging platforms with the added bonus of being able to upload stories, make live video calls and have group chats, beyond just standard text messaging. All of this can encourage children to spend more time on the app and on their phone, contributing towards increased levels of screen time.



REQUESTS FROM STRANGERS

Messenger cannot work without creating a Facebook account first. From here, if your child sets their profile to public, there is a chance that children may receive message requests from people they don't know. There have been reports of online grooming on Facebook and some people use fake profiles to reach out to children they don't know to try and encourage them to engage in conversation.



SECRET CONVERSATIONS

Messenger has a function called 'Secret Conversations' which means that your child can have encrypted end-to-end conversations with another user. Unlike regular chat on Messenger, these messages can only be viewed on the device being used and are not transferred to anywhere else where Messenger is logged in. Messages can also be set to delete after a time, although screenshots can still be taken. This means your child could engage in a private conversation with someone, who may look to take advantage of them, but leave no record of any previous messages.



LIVE STREAMING RISKS



Through its latest feature, Messenger Rooms, Facebook now offers the ability to hold live video calls with up to 50 different users. Although video calls aren't new on Messenger, this latest addition pushes the 'live streaming' element of the app, which is also linked to WhatsApp and Instagram, and doesn't necessarily require a Messenger account. This can heighten the risk factors around privacy, security and being exposed to explicit or inappropriate content from other users with little, to no, prior warning.

OVERSHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION

Messenger can be an easy way for children to overshare personal or sensitive information with people they don't know. If Messenger is granted access to their photo library, links a phone number to the account or enables location settings, children can potentially share their private photos, videos, mobile number and even their current location with others.



CYBERBULLYING RISKS



Like many other social media platforms or messaging apps, Messenger can be an avenue for cyberbullies or trolls to target children through online abuse or sending nasty private messages. This might be in the shape of harassment from others or being purposely excluded from or targeted in group chats.

TARGETED ADS & DATA SCRAPING

Facebook uses algorithms to understand how users interact with their platform and also what they're interested in. Messenger is not immune to this, and data shared - even between your child's friends - can be used to target children with advertisements around topics such as health, fitness, beauty, celebrities or something else which might not always be age-appropriate.



Safety Tips for Parents & Carers



REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

If your child experiences anything negative on Messenger or is sent content from someone which makes them feel uncomfortable, they should speak to you about it and report it directly to Facebook. Users can also be blocked from messaging your child further and if your child doesn't want to display to others that they are online, they can switch off their active status from the settings.



KEEP YOUR PROFILE & STORIES PRIVATE

You can setup your child's profile on Facebook so that only friends can contact them. Similarly, on Messenger, parents can make their child's 'stories' feature only visible to their friends list. Not adding a phone number also means that your child can't be found by searching for their personal number. This helps to keep their account more secure and less likely to be found by people they don't know.



SHARE THEIR MESSENGER ACCOUNT

Some parents insist on checking their children's messages regularly, to see who they are talking to, rather than what they're talking about. This can seem intrusive, but when approached in a sensible, collaborative way, it can help you to keep an eye on who your child is communicating with and help to reduce the chances of misuse.



DISCUSS LIVE STREAMING RISKS

Speak to your child about how to use video calls safely and securely. Make sure that when setting up video calls on Messenger Rooms, invites are only sent to friends and family that your child knows and only allow people into the 'room' who they trust. Discuss how they should behave and that they should act responsibly during a live stream, even if it is with people they know.



EXPLAIN THE DANGERS

Give examples of how Messenger has been used by other users pretending to be someone else to get information that they may do harm with. Tell your children that whilst Messenger is a great way for people to communicate and have fun, not everyone is who they claim to be and that they shouldn't accept messages from people they don't know and shouldn't share any private information, such as pictures, videos or their location, with strangers.



Meet our expert

Alex Wright is a former Facebook employee and social media expert with over 15 years' experience working in digital media. He has worked with some of the biggest organisations in the world and has a wealth of knowledge in understanding how social media platforms work and how they engage their audience.



SOURCES: <https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/>
<https://www.androidcentral.com/how-make-facebook-messenger-secure-possible>



Online Grooming is when someone befriends and builds an emotional relationship with a child and communicates with them through the internet with the intent to commit a sexual offence. This type of victimisation can take place across any platform; from social media and messaging apps to online gaming and live streaming. Often it involves young people being tricked, forced or pressured into doing something they wouldn't normally do (coercion) and often the groomer's goal is to meet the victim in a controlled setting to sexually or physically abuse them. In some cases children may be abducted or have long-lasting psychological damage.



What parents need to know about

ONLINE GROOMING



CHILDREN ARE MOST VULNERABLE

Unsurprisingly children are often most at risk as they are easy to target and unlikely to question the person who is engaging in conversation with them. Groomers will use psychological tricks and methods to try and isolate them from their families and friends and will often choose to target more vulnerable children who may be easier to manipulate. Predators will stalk apps and websites that are popular with young people and will use a 'scattergun' approach to find victims, contacting hundreds online to increase their chances of success.



LIVE STREAMING CONCERNS

Predators may use live video to target children in real-time using tricks, dares or built-in gifts to manipulate them. Grooming often takes the form of a game where children receive 'likes' or even money for performing sexual acts. Social media channels, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, all have live streaming capabilities, but there are many apps which children can use to live stream, including Omegle, Live.me, BIGO Live, YouNow and many more.



ANYONE CAN BE A PREDATOR

The internet has made the ability to interact with strangers online easy. Many sites and apps are reliant on individual users entering their own information when signing up. However individuals can remain anonymous if they choose to enter inaccurate information and many online predator cases are due to groomers using impersonation techniques. However, often the greater threat comes from adults who 'hide in plain sight', choosing to befriend young children without hiding their real identity.



CAN BE DIFFICULT TO DETECT

Unfortunately, most children find the 'grooming' process (before any meeting) an enjoyable one as the predator will compliment, encourage, and flatter them to gain their trust, friendship and curiosity - 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' scenario. This often means children fail to disclose or report what is happening. If the groomer is also previously known to the child, their family and their friends, then this can make detection even harder.



FROM OPEN TO CLOSED MESSAGING

Online predators may contact their victims using any number of ways including social media, forums, chat rooms, gaming communities or live streaming apps. Sometimes there is little need to develop a 'friendship' rapport stage, as the victim has already shared personal information online and is communicating openly with others. Children may also be prepared to add other online users they don't know so well to gain 'online credibility' through increasing their friends list. Predators will often seize this opportunity to slowly build a relationship and then move their conversation with the child to a more secure and private area, such as through direct messaging.

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS

Online predators will use emotive language and aim to form close, trusted bonds with their victims through showering them with compliments and making them feel good about themselves. Often victims will refer to them as their 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends' and it can be difficult to convince some young people that they have been groomed, often leading to lasting psychological effects.

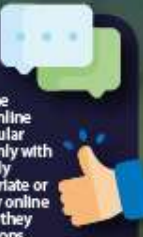


Safety Tips for Parents & Carers



IT'S GOOD TO TALK

It's unlikely that you can stop your child using the internet, nor can you constantly monitor their online activities, but you can talk to your child on a regular basis about what they do online. By talking openly with them about online relationships, they can quickly ascertain the kind of behaviour which is appropriate or inappropriate. Ask them whether they have any online friends or if they play online games with people they haven't met. This could then open up conversations about the subject of grooming.



CHECK PRIVACY SETTINGS

In order to give your child a safer online experience, it is important to check privacy settings or parental controls on the networks, devices, apps, and websites they use. Disable location sharing if you can. If you use location-sharing apps to check where your child is, remember that these could always be used by strangers to follow your child without their knowledge. Ensure that you check options so that location information is never shared with anyone except those they have permission to share with.



MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA & LIVE-STREAMING USE

It's important to be aware of what your child is sharing on social media and with whom. Create your own profile and become 'friends' with them or follow them so that you can monitor their activity. Similarly, always check on them if they are live streaming and implement privacy controls. Choose a generic screen name and profile picture that hides their identity. You may also feel more comfortable being present each time they live stream.



STICK TO 'TRUE FRIENDS'

Make it clear to your child that they should not accept friend requests from people they don't know and to verify friend requests with people who they do know. Encourage them to only interact and engage with 'true friends' (i.e. those friends who don't ask personal questions such as close family and friends. Remind them to never agree to chat privately with a stranger or someone they don't really know and to never divulge personal information, such as mobile phone numbers, addresses, passwords or the name of their school.



DISCUSS HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Talk to your child about what a healthy relationship looks like and how to detect someone who might not be who they claim to be. Explain that groomers will pay your child compliments and engage in conversations about personal information, such as hobbies and relationships. They may admire how well they play an online game or how they look in a photo. Groomers will also try and isolate a child from people close to them, such as parents and friends, in order to make their relationship feel special and unique.

BE SUPPORTIVE

Show your child that you will support them and make sure they understand they can come to you with any concerns they may have. They need to know they can talk to you if someone does something they are uncomfortable with, whether that is inappropriate comments, images, requests or sexual comments.



Meet our expert

Jonathan Taylor is an online safety expert and former Covert Internet Investigator for the Metropolitan Police. He is a specialist in online grooming and exploitation and has worked extensively with both UK and international schools in delivering training and guidance around the latest online dangers, social media apps and platforms.



LOOK OUT FOR WARNING SIGNS

- Child safety experts have identified key grooming patterns and advise parents to look out for:
- Secretive online behaviour.
 - Late night internet or smartphone usage.
 - Meeting new friends in unusual places.
 - Becoming clingy, develop sleeping or eating problems or even bedwetting.
 - Lack of interest in extra-curricular activities.
 - Having new items, such as clothes or phones, unexplainably.
 - Seem withdrawn, anxious, depressed or aggressive.
 - Having older boyfriends or girlfriends.



10 TOP TIPS

REMOTE LEARNING FOR PARENTS

Remote learning can be a great way to continue learning outside the classroom, particularly in difficult circumstances. For parents and carers, the idea of remote learning isn't always straightforward and there can be a number of factors they need to consider, especially around ensuring their children feel comfortable and are familiar with the whole concept. That's why we've created this guide to help parents and carers support their child in getting the most out of their remote learning experience.

1) Take an active interest in your child's learning

As a parent or carer, remote learning will be a new concept for your child and there are bound to be a few teething problems to start with. Take an active interest in their learning and help support them whenever they need a helping hand.



2) Monitor your child's communication and online activity

It's important to remind your child that despite being at home, the same level of behaviour and conduct exists as if they were at school. Encourage them to remain polite, remember their manners and not to post or send any negative comments just because they are behind a computer.



3) Establish a daily schedule and routine

Working from home and trying to learn in a more casual setting that children might associate more with play and a degree of freedom might take a bit of getting used to. Try to stick to a daily routine and use the timetable/schedule that schools have sent home to help children keep on top of their daily learning.



4) Encourage screen breaks away from devices

Remote learning will inevitably require more interaction with computers, laptops and tablets. Teachers will invariably advise on screen breaks however it doesn't hurt to keep a check on their time online or encourage them to get some fresh air/exercise.



5) Ensure your learning device is in a public space in the home

It's important to consider where your PC or laptop is placed if live video is being used. Try to keep the background neutral with no personal information visible and move learning devices out of the bedroom as this could be deemed inappropriate.



6) Implement safety controls and privacy restrictions on apps and software

Dependent on how your school implements remote learning, your child may be required to download certain software or apps. Whilst these are likely to be relatively safe to use, like any other new app or platform, parents should still implement safety controls as a precaution.



7) Ensure your child only uses official school communication channels

It's important that all communication with teachers and school staff is directed through approved school channels, whether that be through the school's online portal or the relevant secure messaging site.



8) Familiarise yourself with relevant school policies

Schools should have a policy on remote learning and direction that they can share with parents. Familiarise yourself with this and ensure you know what is expected of teachers and your child during lessons, both online and offline.



9) Maintain feedback with teachers

Engage in communication with teachers where possible and try to feedback progress and development as well as any helpful suggestions around the learning process. Be transparent but remain professional and only use official channels to communicate.



10) Monitor your child's wellbeing and mental health

Remote learning will likely mean that your child won't get the same level of social interaction and might not see their friends for a while. Keep a check on their wellbeing and try to encourage them to get out as much as you can. Whilst learning from home might seem fun and exciting to start with, missing out on seeing their friends everyday might take its toll.



LIVE



AGE RESTRICTION
13+

WHAT IS HOUSEPARTY?

Houseparty is a live streaming app described as a face-to-face social network where people 'drop in' on each other to video chat, leave messages and hang out in groups. The app is available for iOS, Android, macOS and Google Chrome and has tens of millions of users worldwide. It's important to note that children under the age of 13 must have a parent's permission to access the services, however, no proof of age is required to create an account.

HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE IT?

Each time the app is opened, your child will be instantly connected to other users who are also on the app. Users can create group conversations of up to eight people at one time. Each time a person joins, the screen splits to show everyone who is part of the conversation. Your child can add contacts via phone numbers, search for their usernames, and share a link to their profile. They can have as many rooms as they want and move from chat to chat by swiping across the screen. Along with this functionality comes a few associated risks to be aware of...

LIVE

What parents need to know about HOUSEPARTY

"STRANGER DANGER"

Friends of friends can join conversations on the platform without the need to be connected or known to all the other users in the chat. Houseparty calls this feature 'Stranger Danger'. While it does alert users when individuals they may not know enter their chat room, it also suggests strangers might be a reason for 'party time'. There's also the danger of people attempting to deliberately mislead others by using false names or usernames.

SEXUALISED MESSAGES

People may use live streaming apps such as Houseparty to engage in inappropriate or illegal activities. There have been concerning reports directly linked to Houseparty, including one incident where two Mancunian children aged 11 and 12 were reportedly targeted by men exposing themselves back in 2017. Outside of their close friendship group, it's also important to note that friends of friends can also connect with your child via the app, which may include people with this intention.

CONTENT BEING SHARED

The 'facemall' feature lets users share moments from their Houseparty conversations by recording and sharing 15-second snippets of chats. They also have the option to save these moments to their gallery. For privacy purposes, every member of the group will see a notification if another member is recording - this could be a concern if your child shares something in the live chat they may later regret. Once recorded, they lose control over the video and how it is used. Screenshots of live streams and private messages can also be taken which could be shared widely and embarrass users.

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is when people use technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. Group chats can be used by bullies to make negative or hurtful comments which may cause offence or be harmful to others in the group. Exclusion from friendship groups within the platform may make your child feel sad and left out/socially excluded.

OVERSHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION

Children often don't understand the risks involved in giving out too much personal information in a live stream or within their profile. They may also be less protective of personal details during online conversations. One example of this within a live chat could be their background revealing information about where they live or go to school without realising.

IN-APP PURCHASES

By tapping on the dice icon your child can play a game called 'Heads Up!' where one person gives clues to describe someone or something and the other players guess. Three cards are included for free but additional decks cost real money. There's the potential for your child to get carried away playing the game while working up a small fortune.

Top Tips for Parents

TURN ON PRIVATE MODE

One additional tip is to use the app settings to turn on 'Private Mode' which automatically locks the room, instead of doing it manually. Parents with questions can always email us at hello@houseparty.com

SAFER CONVERSATIONS

With live streaming being such a popular feature on apps, it is important that you are aware of the dangers associated with it in order to protect your child effectively. Have regular and honest conversations with your child about what apps they are using and how they are using them. It may be a good idea to have your child show you how they use Houseparty and how to navigate through the platform so you are aware of how it works.

CHECK COMMUNICATIONS

Also, it's important to be aware of who is on their friends list and who they are communicating with. Remind your child to not communicate with people they do not know and trust. If they experience something on the app that makes them feel uncomfortable then they should tell a trusted adult immediately. Remind your child that if they get an invite to join a Houseparty room from someone they don't recognise, then they should ignore the request.

'LOCK' ROOMS

In regards to communicating with users on the platform, we advise that your child uses the 'lock' feature to make their conversations private. This means that other users, especially strangers, can't join their conversations.

PROTECT THEIR PRIVACY

Your child may unknowingly give away personal information during a live stream, including their location. Talk to them about what constitutes 'personal information' and make sure they do not disclose anything to anyone during a live stream, even to their friends. Advise them to remove any items in their live stream (school uniform, street name, posters etc.) that could potentially expose their location or personal information. Check your child's privacy settings thoroughly. You have the option to opt out of certain uses and disclosures of personal information, such as turning off the app's location sharing option.

PROTECTING YOUR CHILD'S DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

As the videos are live, it may lead to the misconception that whatever happens in the video will disappear once the live stream ends. All content shared on the app can be recorded or screenshotted and shared to a wider community. It is important that your child knows that what they do now may affect their future opportunities. In addition to this, the video chats can't be reviewed later which means unless a parent or carer is sitting nearby during a call, they won't know what has been said. It's worth bearing in mind that parents can see when their child has last communicated with someone and for how long for under the 'We Time' feature.

REMOVE LINKS TO OTHER APPS

Users can link their account to both Facebook and Snapchat, or can simply share a link to their profile. We advise that you remove these links and remind your child not to publicly share access to their online profiles as there is the potential for strangers to get hold of your child's information or communicate with them.

BE PRESENT

A study conducted by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) found that 96% of streams showed a child on their own, often in their bedroom or bathroom. If your child is going to conduct a live stream, ask them if you could be present for it. This will give you a greater understanding of what your child is doing during their live streams and who they are streaming to.

REPORTING AND BLOCKING

If your child faces a problem while using the app they can report direct to the platform by shaking their phone. A prompt will pop up allowing you to report issues immediately by clicking on the 'report now' button. They also have the option to report and block users directly on the user's profile.



SOURCES:
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/houseparty-the-chat-app-thats-talking-over-facebook-mktm3mchm>
<https://www.rtf.org.uk/>
<https://www.houseparty.com>