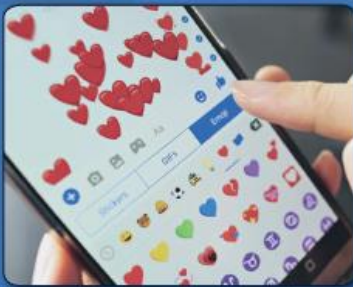




Facebook Messenger is a communication and chat application which is part of the wider Facebook platform and has been a standalone app on mobile devices since 2011. Through Messenger, users can exchange messages and send photos, videos, stickers, gifs, audio files and play games. It allows both one-to-one 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>