At National Online Safety, we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one platform of many which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

What Parents & Carers Need to Know About WECHAT

17+ App Store Rating

WeChat is an all-in-one communications app for free text messaging, voice and video calls, photo sharing and games. Additionally, through "mini-programs" (apps integrated into the main WeChat platform), it becomes a one-stop shop by allowing users to do things like send payments, make purchases or book taxis, flights and hotels. Headquartered in Shenzhen, China, WeChat is one of the world's most popular social media downloads, with around 980 million active users.

Risky Connections

Users of WeChat can exchange contact info instantly through their own unique QR code. That also means that one quick scan of your child's QR code would give a person all of their details. Users can also add a person to their WeChat network using just a phone number – and, more worryingly, there's an option to search *specifically* for nearby users, utilising their device's location services.



Age-Inappropriate Activity

Social services in Malaysia (where WeChat is among the top three messaging platforms) have highlighted the app as a conduit for teenagers and schoolchildren to gamble online, arrange sexual hook-ups and deal drugs. WeChat's age rating is 17+, but this is only an electronic verification: a child could simply lie about their age to download the app and would not have to provide proof.

Random Contacts

WeChat has a 'discover users' mode which allows you to connect with other people – either worldwide or nearby – entirely at random, through the device's GPS locator. The 'shake' facility (i.e. literally shaking the phone) puts you in touch with another user (most likely a stranger) and instantly allows messaging and video contact. For children and young adults, this feature is potentially incredibly dangerous.

Surveillance Suspicions

Some western journalists have alleged that WeChat is being used on behalf of the Chinese government to mine data, access voicemails and track users' physical location. The Indian Government banned the app in 2020 over "data and privacy issues". In the USA, the Government has initiated legal proceedings to block WeChat, citing national security and data privacy concerns.

Questionable Impartiality

There have been numerous media reports of WeChat blocking or censoring messages because of 'restricted' keywords, usually related to politically sensitive subjects (for example, criticism of the Chinese Government's response to the Covid-19 outbreak). Some people's accounts have allegedly been disabled because of something comparatively innocuous that they posted. If this is accurate, it raises questions about the reliability and fairness of WeChat's content.

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Advice for Parents & Carers

Research It Yourself

If your child is interested in using WeChat, it's a good idea to download it yourself before they do, to help you decide if it is appropriate for them to use. Getting the app yourself will allow you to experience how easy it is to obtain, how users can create and share their own content, quickly make connections with other people, discover users' locations and so on.

Disable Location Services

If you *are* intending to let your child use WeChat, we would strongly suggest that you do not let the app access their device's location services. That will not only prevent random – and quite probably, unwanted – contact requests from strangers, but it will also stop other users nearby being able to pinpoint your child's whereabouts.

Adjust Security Settings

Unless a user alters it, the default security setting is that anyone else on WeChat (anywhere in the world) is able to see what they've posted – including photos and videos. What's more, when a user adds text, images or video to their 'Moments' (a scrolling feed of friends' updates), not only their contacts but anyone nearby can see what they've uploaded.

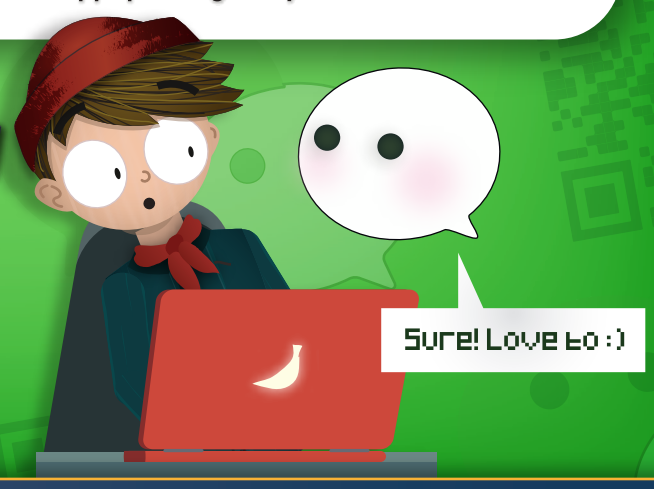
Remember Linked Accounts

Bear in mind that users can connect WeChat to their Facebook and Twitter. That makes it easy to share content from the app – including posts that were intended to be private. If your child does link social media accounts, encourage them to think carefully before posting. Similarly, WeChat offers in-app purchases of stickers and games, so you may want to discuss in-app spending with your child in advance.

Meet Our Expert



Jonathan Taylor is an authority on online safety, social media and online grooming, having previously been a covert internet investigator with the Metropolitan Police for more 10 years. He has worked extensively with UK and international schools to deliver training and guidance around the latest apps, platforms and dangers.



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