

Introduction

WhatsApp is an instant messaging and video calling app. It can be downloaded and used for free. Users can send text, voice and video messages, make voice and video calls, share images, documents, videos, gifs, links and user locations. It can be used to send individuals messages but is popular for its group chat function. Multiple contacts can be added to a group chat where everyone can share messages and chats can be named so they're easily identifiable. It has become very popular in Organisations and events who use it to communicate to groups.

If a WhatsApp group is set up in the name of an Organisation, then the Organisation should have administrator rights to the group. WhatsApp group administrators may be responsible for members' content. An admin is automatically the person who creates the group. Additional admins can be added, without necessarily agreeing to be one. Group admins then can control who is invited to, or removed from, the group chat. The safeguarding concern is that users can see personal phone numbers of users. The group should not be used for private conversations with anyone else using the group.

The minimum age to use WhatsApp in Ireland is 13 (this was updated in April 2024 to be consistent with WhatsApp's minimum age requirements globally). WhatsApp messages are end-to-end encrypted – which means that no one but the people who send and receive the message can see it or retrieve it, not even WhatsApp.

The negatives

- WhatsApp has a fast-paced and reactive nature; it doesn't allow for much thinking time about what information is shared. You as organisers or hosts can't control what others post. However, the group admin for the chat can delete other people's messages, videos or images.
- Contacts can be removed from chats or blocked but it won't prevent inappropriate behaviour before it happens, so it's often used as an afterthought.
- Disappearing messages can be set to disappear after 24 hours, so inappropriate messages could fly under the radar.
- The 'read once' feature allows a message or image to be sent and then to automatically delete.
- Phone numbers are viewable by all users in chats.
- Live locations could be seen as a positive and a negative!
- Not everyone has a smart phone, or internet access.

The positives

- It's fun, fast, free, easy to use and share information with your contacts.
- You can invite people to join your group chat, which can be access controlled by a group administrator.
- You can also directly communicate with young people, parents and carers, quickly and efficiently, on a platform that young people use and understand.
- Read receipts show you quickly and easily who has or hasn't seen the information you have shared.
- Information can be sent on the go and directly to your group and responded to quickly too.

Do...

- Have an adult (Sports Leader/Coach or Manager) set the group up (allowing admin rights).
- Only the people within the group can see the information shared – so it's important to have a least 2 trusted adults as leads for your WhatsApp group who are accountable to each other, your codes of conduct and safeguarding procedures.
- Tell participants and parents what the app is/isn't to be used for.

- Get the participants to agree how the app is to be used e.g. only sailing/powerboating/event orientated content.
- Keep language appropriate and discuss relevant topics only.
- Ensure members have a mechanism to report inappropriate content.

Don't...

- Use the app for private messaging.
- Use the app to replace formal feedback.
- Use the app for non-Organisation messaging.
- Share grievances on WhatsApp.
- Coaches and leaders should not be messaging any children or young people directly on an individual WhatsApp chat.

Safeguarding Concerns

- Encrypted messages pose a risk to young people, as only the people within the chat can read and listen to the messages.
- This could be a potential safeguarding concern, as it can be a route for individuals to bully or “gang up” on someone else.
- This level of security could also be used to share messages, images and gifs which could potentially be inappropriate, with little to no accountability to outside agencies under the circumstances of an investigation.
- WhatsApp cannot be monitored for illegal activity.

GDPR Concerns

- There is a possibility for inappropriate messages, images and videos to be shared.
- Possibility of bullying (cyberbullying) or grooming behaviour taking place.
- The ‘read once’ feature, allows a message or image to be sent and then to automatically delete once it has been seen. This can encourage some people to send abusive or upsetting messages or images.
- Disappearing messages (which disappear after 24 hours) unless the group is monitored closely could go unnoticed.
- Live locations could be shared in the group showing a young person’s live location.

From a GDPR concern, WhatsApp is not compliant when used for official communications. This is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, if a WhatsApp group is set up in an Organisation every parent in that group has their phone number, and possibly profile photograph if they have one, shared with every other parent in the group without giving their consent for their personal data to be shared in this manner.

The lack of auditing ability as outlined above for the Organisation Administrator has over a WhatsApp group is an issue. The lack of auditing ability also makes it difficult to comply with a Subject Access Request or request for deletion if one were received.

Along with the above, there is an issue presently with Whatsapp as to the location of the storage of information within it. If personal data is transferred outside the EEA, the entity transferring it in the Organisation will have to ensure additional safeguards are in place which is not possible when using Whatsapp.

Therefore, due to these reasons, the use of WhatsApp in an official capacity is not advisable, by Irish Sailing and recommend the use of group emails, group text messaging services or group social media platforms that adhere to Irish Sailing’s Social Media Policy.

Safer WhatsApp checklist

Use this handy printable checklist when setting up your own WhatsApp group for young people to make sure you're doing everything you can to keep them safe.

We have...

Researched WhatsApp and understand how to use it	
Sought permission to add young people to a new WhatsApp group (from both the young person and their parent or carer)	
Asked young people, parents and carers to sign up to codes of conduct and a safer use policy/online safety policy	
Considered the name of our group chat carefully	
Ensured we have at least 2 staff members or volunteers who are part of the WhatsApp group to have responsibility and are trained to monitor and moderate the group chat. These individuals are: • Garda vetted • Have valid Safeguarding level 1 training or higher • Understand our safeguarding procedures • Know what's expected from them through our code of conduct, safeguarding policy and online safety policy • understand the app and the risks	
Invited parents to the group or have created a separate group for parents and carers and considered the advantages and disadvantages of both options.	
Signposted young people to helpful resources, websites and support (for online safety and social media usage).	
Let young people, parents and carers know who they can go to if they have any worries, concerns or need any help.	

* <https://thecpsu.org.uk/media/41fmxdkp/whatsapp-go-to-guide.pdf>