Group Chats

Group chats can be an excellent way for several people to participate in an online conversation together. Group chats most commonly happen through Whatsapp, Instagram Messenger, Facebook Messenger, Facebook Messenger for Kids, and Discord. Users are getting younger and younger.

They can be both helpful and harmful. Notifications ping all hours of the day, stacks of unread messages build up until they are not worth the effort to catch up on, and important information gets lost in the stream.

However, it does not have to be this way.

We have not been informed of any issues with kids under 13yrs using Facebook Messenger for kids because we would assume because of the strict parental controls included. However, parents need to remain vigilant. Group chats on other apps can also be where drama, nasty behaviours, exclusion, cancel culture, and bullying can thrive.

However, what we find time and again is that if there is a group chat of 14 young people, for example, that is potentially 14 sets of parents that may

be checking their child's phone and reading that chat, mainly if those parents have decided to keep an eye on their child's device and interactions while they are younger. There have been countless times schools have told us parents had contacted them because of the nasty, bullying, or inappropriate things happening in the group chats.

Furthermore, there are ways to share online content via screenshots, saving and forwarding to other people. This is when things can spiral and fast.

Drama, exclusion and cyberbullying

There have also been many times when young people have engaged in nasty behaviour about another person in a group chat, then deliberately invited them into the chat to see those comments. The deliberate nature of this abuse makes it cyberbullying.

Group chats happen outside of school hours. Nevertheless, schools are asked to manage the behaviours of the young people involved in the chat by parents, but more often than not, these chats are happening at very late hours of the night. Parents need to help their kids build some intellectual muscle too! Teach them the life skill of politely exiting a social situation that they feel uncomfortable in, online and off.

This should serve as another reminder of everyone's role to combat negative online experiences—especially parents.

Removing access to the devices late at night helps avoid interrupted sleep caused by the group chat notifications and beeps. We asked a group of primary school-aged children this week, "who sleeps with their phone beside their bed" most raised their hands. They also said that they check messages in the middle of the night.

It also avoids having to engage in conversations at night when our emotional part of the brain switches on, our rational part of the brain takes a back seat, and we are therefore left more emotionally vulnerable.

Helping young people take control

Leaving a group chat without warning can offend the remaining group members and become an awkward situation for our text-obsessed generation.

Teach them the skills to know how to leave a group chat that is not helpful or is harmful in any way, including the actual words to use should they need to leave. Fear of missing out (FOMO) is a significant factor in a tween/teen's life, so you will need to navigate around that as well. We hear reports of young people trying to "catch up" on the hundreds of messages that they have received overnight first thing in the morning. Their brains are bombarded first thing in the morning, sometimes after a night of often broken sleep checking messages in the middle of the night. They are often anxious and exhausted from it. We are told this directly by teens.

Kids have come up with statements such as "sorry guys, this is getting pretty nasty, I am out of here" in our sessions as words they can use when they need to remove themselves.

There have also been some hilarious responses that can add some humour while they exit a toxic chat that may also help to defuse a situation. "I don't have to go but I am pretending that I do," "I am going to practice my ninja skills and sneak away now. " Do you want to see my impersonation of a tree?" " I have to go the planet needs me," and do not forget the old "my battery is low" excuse.

However, not all kids have that confidence, and many would prefer to remove themselves from the chat. Again, not always easy for young kids, but we do want them to always be in charge of their online interactions and how those interactions may affect their reputation and digital footprint.

Getting kids to realise that they can be "guilty by association," even if they are not the ones saying the nasty stuff is also a necessary part of growing up and parenting.

We want to give young people the skills to put boundaries around their friendships. We do not have to be accessible all the time just because we can be. We want our kids to know their friends will not go away if they are not involved for 30 minutes while they have dinner.

Teach them to be in charge and confident in their relationships. Their friends will understand that their refusal to engage at every moment has nothing to do with the state of their relationship. They will understand this is the way they manage their time, their devices, and their priorities.

Tips:

Keep group chats positive, helpful, and supportive. These are not places where we have a whinge about someone else, reveal our intimate secrets,

or create drama, gossip, or spread rumours.

Teach them how to leave. Often kids are in multiple chats at once. If the chat is getting toxic, bullying is happening or images circulated, or anything that may be deemed illegal. Take a screenshot and log out, so they do not find themselves in a "guilty by association" situation if something gets reported. Sometimes they have got no other option but to leave a group chat—the notifications have become too much, the conversation has become increasingly irrelevant, and their phone has become cluttered with too many group chats for them to keep across them all. In most cases, the exit button is easy to find. In the case of group chats on Instagram, tap the header banner in a group conversation to see its participants and then tap on Leave Conversation to quit it.

Make sure they know they should not feel compelled to respond straight away or be a part of every single interaction.

Remember that just because there are only six participants in a private chat does not mean that the chat will remain private. There are plenty of ways these chats can become very public.

Avoid using late at night or let people know when they are signing off for the day.

If getting overloaded with alerts, change the way chat notifications appear. Make those pings silent and invisible quickly on both Android and iOS. On Android, open up Settings, go to Apps & notifications, and choose an app to make changes. On iOS, take even more control over the alerts style: From Settings, pick Notifications, then tap on a particular messaging app to see the available options.

It is also useful to silence individual conversations temporarily. It is easy to make sure alerts from certain people come through while limiting the number of pings from everyone in the chat. Most messaging tools and group chat apps allow conversations to be muted for a period, and the option should be easy to find in the app of choice. If not, a simple google search will give instructions.