

Snapchat safety: a guide for teachers and parents



Snapchat has been in the news recently, after a group of children were apparently tricked into sharing sexual images via the app. It's one of the most popular ephemeral messaging services, known for sending images that disappear after a few seconds – which may offer a false sense of security when it comes to sensitive content. So what do you need to know and are there steps you can take to make it safer?

Do the images really disappear?

Once they're opened, images and messages sent using the app (or 'Snaps') should last no more than 10 seconds (or 24 hours, if an image is added to the user's 'Story' rather than sent to individual contacts).

This 10-second lifespan is deceptive. Anyone can take screenshots of the 'Snaps' they receive. You'll be notified if someone takes a screenshot of your message, but you can't get rid of the screenshot unless you convince them to delete it. There are also some apps specifically designed to take screenshots of a Snap without notifying the sender.

Snapchat reserves the rights to the content its users share, and has previously admitted¹ that photos and videos can be recovered – although currently, their Support information says that 'delete is our default' and expired Snaps can't usually be retrieved.²

What's the law?

Sexual images of anyone under 18 are illegal in the UK, regardless of how they are shared. It's against the law for children to take and share sexual images of themselves, and people who save or pass on the images could also end up in legal trouble, even if they are also underage.

Because content shared on Snapchat can be saved and recovered, you should assume there's a record of any Snaps you or your child sends. It's never safe to share illegal images online.

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/11966036/Snapchat-just-reserved-the-rights-to-store-and-use-all-selfies-taken-with-the-device.html>

² <https://support.snapchat.com/a/when-are-snaps-chats-deleted>

Who can send Snaps?

By default, only people you've added to your Snapchat friends list can send you Snaps and view your Story (a Snap that lasts for 24 hours, shared with friends, everyone, or a custom group). You can change your settings to allow Snaps from everyone, and to make your Story public.

If you have kept the default settings and you get a Snap from someone who isn't on your friends' list, you'll be notified that they've added you, but you will need to add them to your friends list to see the Snap.

Often, 'sexting' or abuse on Snapchat involves people who know each other in real life. There have, however, been cases where users lied about their age or gender before trying to get sexual images. It's safest to use Snapchat with known contacts only, and to be careful about adding anyone you don't know and trust.

How do you report abuse?

You can report content or users that violate Snapchat's community guidelines. This covers pornography, sexual images of under-18s, self-harm and other potentially dangerous or upsetting Snaps.

You can report safety or abuse issues on Snapchat by filling out the form here: <https://support.snapchat.com/co/other-abuse>. You can't report on someone else's behalf, unless you are their parent or carer and they are under 18.

To block a user from sending you Snaps, find them in your friends list, tap their name, then the gear icon, then select Block.

Is Snapchat safe?

Although it's sometimes associated with 'sexting', anecdotally, that doesn't seem to be the reason most teens use it. There's nothing inherently bad about Snapchat, as long as you remember that the things you share might not disappear completely.

If you are worried about an adult targeting children online, you can report to CEOP here: <https://www.ceop.police.uk/Ceop-Report/>. You can report child sexual abuse images hosted anywhere online to the Internet Watch Foundation: <https://www.iwf.org.uk/report>.

Note: This information is current as of January 2016, but apps regularly change their privacy and reporting policies. Please check <https://support.snapchat.com/> for the latest information from Snapchat.