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Learning, Enjoying & Succeeding Together

Wednesday 23rd October 2024

Dear Parents & Carers,

Online Safety Advice and information regarding 'WhatsApp'

At Bearwood we are committed to promoting the safe and responsible use of the internet and as such we feel it is our responsibility to raise this particular issue as a growing concern, due to the increase in inappropriate use of the texting app 'WhatsApp', particularly amongst our Maple 1 children. It is very important that our children are reminded about how they can be good digital citizens and this includes how they choose to behave on apps such as WhatsApp.

Below is a WhatsApp guide developed by CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection services). It gives an overview of key aspects for parents to consider. **One major concern with WhatsApp is that the recommended age is 13, but many children as young as 6 or 7 are using the service.** The maturity of users is a real concern when using the App because one videos, images and voice messages are shared, the users receiving them can then do what they want with them. This has implications for the future and most children do not have the maturity levels to fully understand what this means for them as they grown into young adults. The information below gives a really good outline about what should be considered.

What is WhatsApp?
WhatsApp is a mobile messaging app which allows users to exchange messages using existing phone contacts without having to pay text message fees. WhatsApp Messenger is available on most mobile devices. WhatsApp users can create groups and send each other unlimited images, video and audio messages.

Does WhatsApp have any age restrictions?
As part of its Terms of Service, WhatsApp's **minimum age of use is 13 years old**. By using WhatsApp, a user agrees to provide certain personal information such as their mobile phone number, billing and mobile device information. If WhatsApp learns that identifiable information of a child under 13 has been collected on the WhatsApp Site or WhatsApp Service, then WhatsApp may deactivate the account.

Should I be concerned about WhatsApp as a parent/carer?
WhatsApp is a great way for young people to socialise with their friends. Children can only talk to existing contacts on their phone, although this may feel safer, it's still important to remember that some content shared may not be appropriate for children, or they have contacts (strangers) in their phone who they have never met face to face. Likewise, as with all social media, caution is advised over your child's digital footprint, particularly the content (photos, videos and messages) they choose to share via WhatsApp. Once shared, it can be copied, re shared and posted anywhere online.

Group chats on WhatsApp
WhatsApp also contains a group chat function. The feature lets users chat with up to 512 people in one conversation stream. Each group is set up by one contact who becomes the group admin – they're the only user who can add or remove participants and change/add new group admins. Group conversations usually take place between friends. But sometimes, users can be added to a group where they don't know everyone else. Even if fellow users in the group aren't contacts, they will still be able to see messages your child posts in the group, and your child will be able to see theirs. Likewise, if they're added to a group with someone they've blocked, the blocked person will be able to contact them there. Therefore, it's possible they could see or be contacted by someone they don't know and could be vulnerable to content posted by this person.

Group chats – advice
Although a user cannot control who adds them to a group chat, **they can always control their own participation within it** – they can leave whenever they want to.
It's a good idea to advise your child that if they are in a group chat with someone they don't know and are uncomfortable with, they should exit the group and speak to you about it.

End-to-end Encryption
WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption in all its users' communications. This means that only those with access to the phones of the sender and receiver of a message conversation between the two can access them.

Privacy settings, reporting and blocking
The app has a default privacy setting which allows anyone else on WhatsApp to view the user's profile photo, status, and when they last used the app.
It's easy to change this setting to specify that the WhatsApp profile is only seen by 'My contacts' or 'Nobody' making the app feel a lot safer for younger users. **To do this, click on the WhatsApp icon on your phone's home screen, then tap the 3 dots on the top right then tap Settings > Account > Privacy > Status.** In this area, you can also manage any blocked contacts.

How do I report a user to WhatsApp?
There is no direct way to report a user, or specific abuse, other than to block them from sending you further messages. To do this, tap:
Settings > **Account** > **Privacy** > **Blocked Contacts**
WhatsApp messages sent by a blocked contact will not show up on your child's phone and will never be delivered to them. The 'last seen' status information and profile picture will no longer be visible to blocked contacts. To permanently delete a contact in WhatsApp, you will need to delete them from your phone's list of contacts. If you have any concerns about grooming, sexual abuse or exploitation on Whatsapp or on any online app or site, Report to CEOP (the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command) at www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre (link is external).

How do I disable a WhatsApp account?
Go to:
Settings > Account > Delete My Account
This will remove all account information from the service including deleting all message history, and removing the user from all WhatsApp group.