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 of many apps 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 WINK

AGE RATING 13+

Wink is a messaging app which allows children to connect and communicate with other users. In a similar style to Tinder, Wink uses the swipe method for browsing profiles and accepting or declining them. Once two users have accepted each other by swiping on one another's profile, they can then communicate and play games online together. The fact that Wink allows children to share photos, personal information and their location with other users has caused significant concern.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

POTENTIAL FOR GROOMING

Wink accounts can't be made private – so when a young person uploads images and shares their social media usernames, it's easier for potential groomers to stalk and locate them online. The fact that children prioritise having an abundance of friends is also a concern: they're more likely to accept someone just to build their friend count – possibly including users with sinister intentions.

ACCIDENTAL OVER-SHARING

Many young people don't consider privacy when they choose to share their social media usernames on their Wink profile. This allows other people to connect with them on multiple platforms, strengthening their online presence and reputation. Some children post photos which reveal aspects of their personal life to other users – showing their house, school, friends and family, for instance.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

18 CENSORED

Many popular messaging apps contain profiles featuring profanity, nude or semi-nude photos and users openly looking for a "wifey" or "hook ups". Users can send messages anonymously, which engenders a sense of power and freedom. Children often engage in inappropriate behaviour more willingly when it's anonymous, even if it's not the sort of thing they would take part in normally.

CYBERBULLYING

D@*#!

Being anonymous online provides some users with an incentive to bully others through toxic private conversations. Anonymous bullies can send hurtful messages or pressure young people into sending inappropriate content. Being a victim of cyberbullying can result in children becoming depressed and showing low self-esteem. If your child is exhibiting these signs, it's time to step in.

EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME

Wink encourages repeated engagement through signing in daily, making connections, building up a message 'streak' and publicly sharing stories. The reward is 'gems', which allow users to connect with more people, play games and edit their profile background. This can lead to children spending an excessive amount of screen time on the app, which of course can be detrimental to their health.

Advice for Parents & Carers

DO YOUR RESEARCH

If you *do* decide to allow your child to have a Wink account – or you find that they already have one – it's vital to talk to them about how to use the app responsibly and keep themselves safe. You could also consider exploring Wink yourself and becoming familiar with the app before letting your child download it, as there are no security settings or parental controls that can be put into place.

BE WARY OF SHARING

HELLO MY NAME IS OSCAR

It's important that your child stays aware of what they're sharing online. Remind them about the importance of not posting personal information like their full name or which school they go to. Many users share their other social media account details on Wink to build their friend count, but we would recommend advising your child not to give strangers multiple avenues to contact them.

BALANCE SCREEN TIME

Before having a chat with your child about screen time, ask yourself if you're being a positive role model. Get your child thinking about how much time they spend on the app: is it healthy? Is it affecting their offline relationships with people? Is it impacting their mood? If so, you could suggest some activities you can do together which aren't so reliant on digital technology.

OFFER YOUR SUPPORT

While it's not always easy to talk about inappropriate content with your child, it's crucial that they understand the impact of sending or receiving it. They also need to feel that they can speak to you about it without worrying about consequences. Emphasise that, if your child receives any messages that make them feel uncomfortable, they can block the sender and report them to the app.

DISCUSS LOSS OF OWNERSHIP

It's essential that young people understand that once content goes online, the sender no longer has any control over where it will end up. While your child may feel like they can trust their online 'friend', that person is still a stranger. Even sharing one inappropriate image, for example, could then be used as leverage – as their 'friend' threatens to release it publicly unless the child sends more.

BE CAUTIOUS OF NEW CONTACTS

Remind your child that not everyone online is who they say they are, and some users have harmful intentions. If someone on Wink is asking them lots of personal questions or suggests meeting up in real life, these are definite red flags. Encourage your child to ask for help if they're unsure about a particular profile. Remember, the app has a block button: your child shouldn't be afraid to use it!

Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.

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Sources: https://www.getwinkapp.com/faq/

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