

A guide to video chatting

Video-chatting services have enjoyed a surge in popularity ever since much of the UK was placed on lockdown, with some reaching the top of the App Store charts.

Now that meeting a group of friends for coffee or going to the cinema is out of the question, video chats have become a crucial way to help us stay in touch with friends and loved ones – and that’s just as true for children as it is for adults.

Here’s everything you need to know about the subject – and how to help your child be safer when using the various platforms.

What are the risks?

- Because video chats are visual, young people might accidentally **reveal information they don’t want to share**. And because they happen in real-time, there’s no way for young people to backpedal if they say something they wish they hadn’t.
 - If young people join larger group chats, they might end up **talking to people they don’t know** – including people who might not have their best interests at heart.
 - Young people’s **personal data** may be at risk if the platform they’re using gets hacked. Their data might also be shared with another service without their knowledge.
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What are the main platforms?

Skype

For a long time, the veteran Skype was synonymous with video chatting, and many people still use the term ‘to Skype’ when they want to strike up a video conversation. The pioneer no longer has the monopoly it once had, but it’s still used by thousands to stay in touch with friends and family.

The Microsoft-owned service is available on **several platforms** – including desktop, mobile and even Xbox – and enables you to talk one-on-one or in groups of **up to 50 people** for free. Once you’ve logged in with your Microsoft account, you can easily populate your contact list by adding people through their username, then start chatting.

It’s very easy for even the youngest user to wrap their head around Skype, but it does require its users to be **at least 13 years old** – although there’s no robust age-verification in place. There are, however, **controls for parents** to make the user-experience safer for their child, such as hiding their username from search and only allowing friends to contact them.

Houseparty

The free app Houseparty has recently taken the world by storm and surged to the top of the charts on both the Apple App Store and Google Play Store. Much like an actual house party, this app lets you wander in and out of ‘rooms’ as you please, invite friends whom other people in the room might not know, and connect with people (friends of friends) you might not otherwise call.

Whereas, on other services, you might schedule a time for a catch-up, Houseparty is designed for groups of **up to eight people** to have **informal, ad-hoc ‘parties’**. One feature that makes it different from its competitors is that the user can **play games** with the other people in the room, which can be a useful ice-breaker when you don’t know everybody.

Houseparty connects you by linking to your social media accounts such as Facebook and Snapchat, so it’s **not suitable for children younger than 13**. Since the idea behind Houseparty is to branch out from your immediate social circle, there’s a slightly higher chance of young people talking to strangers (though people still have to be invited in and have to be already connected with one person in the ‘room’), so it might be a good idea for parents to go through the associated risks with their child before they join the party.

FaceTime

Apple’s service FaceTime comes integrated on every Apple device – iPhones, iPads, Macs etc – and is free to use.

You simply sign in with your Apple ID and the app syncs with your phone or computer’s contact list. Once that’s done, you’re dropped straight into the app and can call anyone you know **who has an Apple device**. It allows you to do both one-on-one calls or join groups of **up to 32 people**.

FaceTime offers a **very stable**, no-frills video chat experience, but it’s limiting in that you can only call other Apple users. **It’s good for one-on-one calls** and is a great way to stay connected to the people you are closest to, but because adding contacts is much clunkier than on other services, FaceTime is **not the best service for group calls**.

Zoom

Few people had actually heard of Zoom before the COVID-19 epidemic, but it has since seen an immense increase in sign-ups. Despite being primarily a business-facing service, it has widened its scope to accommodate growing demand and has now developed into a popular platform for communicating privately.

With Zoom, you can either talk privately with one other person or host group chats of **up to 100 people**. It’s free to get started, but **group chats are limited to 40 minutes** unless you upgrade to a premium account.

Zoom is great if you’re planning larger virtual get-togethers, but it’s not the most user-friendly alternative for young people. Its privacy standards have also come under fire recently, with a lawsuit filed in late March alleging it was passing data to Facebook, even if

the user didn't have an account with the social media platform. The company says it has now made changes to stop that happening.

On the plus side, the fact that users have to be given the code by the organiser or participant to join a chat should make it less likely that any unexpected guests drop in.

How can I support children?

Building **digital resilience** is the most effective way of ensuring that children and young people can recognise and manage the risks involved in video chatting – and continue to make the most of their experiences online.

Digital resilience is developed by **understanding** when you might be at risk; **knowing** how to respond to risks and seek help; **learning** from your experiences; and **recovering** when things go wrong.

Help your child understand when they might be at risk:

- Explain how video chatting is different from, for example, texting. Because people can see your surroundings, you might give away information you don't want to share – particularly if you're talking to someone you don't know very well.
- Encourage your child to take sensible steps around protecting their privacy – for instance using different passwords for each service and making them hard to guess.

Help them know how to respond to risks and seek help:

- Try to get familiar with the different settings and parental controls on the service your child uses, where they're available.
- Ask them if they know how to respond if they see or hear something that makes them feel uncomfortable, or stumble across unexpected strangers in the chat.

Help them learn from their experiences:

- To help them think critically, ask them what they like and don't like about the video-chatting service that they use.

Help them recover when things go wrong:

- Check that they know who to talk to if they see or hear something that makes them uncomfortable, or receive messages that worry them.