What Parents & Carers Need to Know about HOOP FOR

App Store Rating 13+

Hoop is a social networking app that syncs with Snapchat to help users build their community of friends. It works along similar principles to Tinder: swiping left or right will reject or accept potential contacts, making new connections in the process. When two users accept each other, they can then communicate via Snapchat. There is no chat function on Hoop itself: video and audio calls, messaging and image sharing all take place through Snapchat. When a user adds a new Hoop contact, they are essentially sharing their personal information from Snapchat.

No Age Verification

The app groups ages 13–17 together and age 18+ years separately, so adults do not see children's profiles – and Hoop warns users that they must input their real date of birth. However, there is no age verification system, meaning that an individual with intentions of grooming could sign up pretending to be a child so that they could be connected with younger users.

In-app Purchases

Hoop offers in-app purchases that allow users to buy 'diamonds': the digital currency required to connect with others. Users can earn diamonds by watching videos, sharing links or contact lists, adding friends and completing surveys; alternatively, diamonds can be bought in packs, with costs ranging from 99p to £28.99, which potentially could prove to be very expensive.

Visible Location

Hoop gives users the option to share their Snap Story on their Hoop profile. Snap Stories are visible for 24 hours and, by default, show the user's exact location on the Snap Map. This means that not only will a young person's friends be able to see this information but all Hoop users too – including, potentially, individuals who may have sinister motives for pinpointing a child's whereabouts.

Grooming Risk

If a stranger uses Hoop to connect with your child on Snapchat, it means they would have access to your child's personal information, location, photos, videos and stories shared with their friends on Snapchat (unless your child has changed their privacy settings). Messages in Snapchat are automatically deleted after they're read, making it impossible for parents to monitor conversations.

Potential Compulsive Use

Users are rewarded with diamonds for hitting certain targets. To reach these milestones, young people may be inclined to add as many friends as possible – including strangers. Users are also assigned a level that is displayed on their Hoop profile; to achieve a higher level, users must add more connections – which provides an incentive for children to spend more time on the app.

Possible Data Collection

One of the reasons Hoop has remained free to use is that it hosts video adverts and user surveys, which reward users with diamonds for taking part. This practice strongly suggests that the app collects personal information from the user, based on the adverts they watch and their responses to surveys, and then shares this data with third-party organisations.

Advice for Parents & Carers

Learn How to Report and Block

If your child sees or is sent something that makes them feel uncomfortable, Hoop has a reporting and blocking function. When reporting a user, you are asked to provide a reason why you are reporting them (for example, nudity or sexual content, hate speech, or using a fake age or gender). You then get a notification that the other user has been reported or blocked.

Limit Spending Power

If your child's device is linked to a bank card, a PayPal account or another form of payment, ensure that you have either removed this connection or adjusted the security settings so that you get notifications of any attempts to make in-app purchases. Make sure that you have set a password which has to be entered for a purchase to go ahead.

Avoid Over-Sharing

Talk to your child about what they share online and who they share it with. Make them aware that once something is online, then anyone can see it. Talk to them about what might not be safe to post online (for example, things which could give away their home address or that of their school, explicit photos or their current location). Make sure that they don't share something they will regret later.

Be Wary of Strangers

Talk to your child about the dangers of connecting with strangers online. Encourage them not to engage in private messaging with people they don't know – particularly on Snapchat, as automatically disappearing messages makes them difficult for trusted adults to monitor. Ask them to think about why they are adding all these connections and whether they genuinely need hundreds of 'friends' on Snapchat.

Adjust Privacy Settings

Check the privacy settings in place on your child's Snapchat account so that only friends or a custom group can see their stories, Snap Map and any images that they post. You may wish to seriously consider going into the settings and enabling 'ghost mode' to turn off the location services, so your child's whereabouts won't be publicly visible to other users.

Encourage Safe Communication

With the amount of time that young people spend communicating with others online, it's vital to ensure that these connections are positive and healthy ones. Regularly check which apps your child is using: if there are any new ones, talk to your child about what these apps are and how they work. If you are unsure about a new app, you could download it to try yourself and see if it is suitable.

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.

SOURCES:

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