Online Safety Update – Video Chat

In the current environment, many of us are using different ways to try and keep in touch with our friends and family. This online safety update outlines of the most popular apps children and young people might be using to keep in touch with their friends online: Houseparty. We have also included some advice to help you keep your children safe online if you are allowing them to use this app.

How does Houseparty work?

Houseparty is a video-focused social network app. The app can bring together people to video chart with up to 8 friends (and friends of friends) at the same time, via live video and texts allowing only users to add people they already know via Facebook or their device's contacts list.

Creating an account with Houseparty is simple: all that is needed is a username. You can also add your phone number to give the app access to your contacts list. This automatically allows you access to anyone on your list; however, entering your phone number is optional. Users can also manually enter the Houseparty username of anyone they wish to chat with. This means that users could potentially add any user to their chat, even if they are a stranger. This poses a risk for our children.

Chat requests are sent out to friends via notifications through the app or through text messages. As soon as a friend responds, the video chat is ready to begin. The real-time accessibility of this app allows friends to enjoy each other's company as though they were all in the same room.

Because of this ease of access, children could be unwillingly put into contact with strangers when joining the Houseparty of one of their contacts.

Is the Houseparty app safe for young people and children?

The app has an age rating of 12+, however, it is easy for kids younger than 12 to enter any age when signing up. Research conducted by internetmatters.org found that 60% of Houseparty users are between the ages of 16 and 24.

Although it appears Houseparty's advertising only features young people in their 20s, the app is popular among children under 18.

Some of the language and images Houseparty uses may be impressionable to very younger children, particularly those that are vulnerable. So, it's important to monitor what your child is using the app for and who they are communicating with.

How to keep your child safe on Houseparty

If a child doesn't "lock" their chat room and choose private settings, other users can pop into the video chat. So, it's important to show and sit down with your child to switch privacy filters and other controls on when video chatting. This keeps video chats private and secure. Please see the advice in the next section to help you do this.
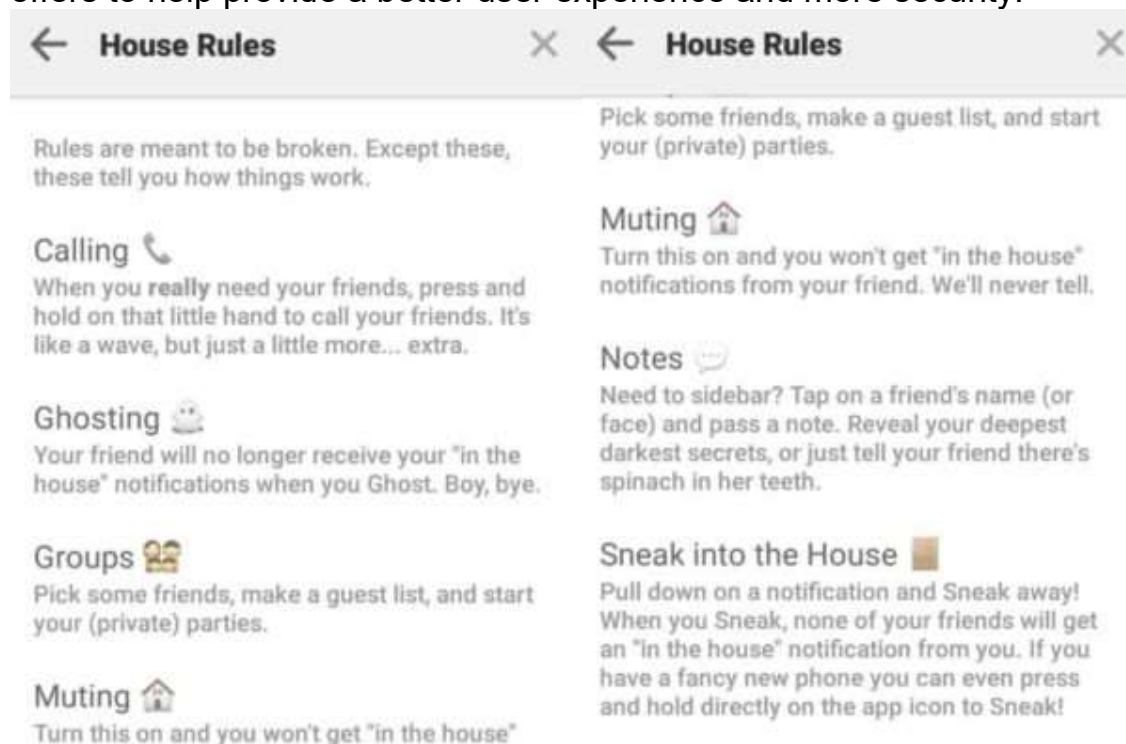
Because there's no screening and the video is live, there's always the possibility of inappropriate content for children. The biggest risks are communicating with people children don't know well, sexting, pictures and screenshots getting shared around, and spending too much time in virtual hangouts.

Parents should also note that users can send links to their profiles on the app via a text message to anybody.

What are Houseparty's safety and privacy features?

Since Houseparty is a video chat app, it could be used by strangers intending to cause harm to minors, making it a concern for parents. Houseparty has created a few security features making it harder for predators to use the app:

• **House Rules** – under the 'House Rules' section in the app, Houseparty has a list of "rules" that it states are not meant to be broken. These are features that the app offers to help provide a better user experience and more security.

• **Room lock** – users can also lock the 'room' using a lock button on the bottom left side of the app's home page. This prevents anyone from joining the room, including preventing other users from joining the room per invite from anyone else.

- **"Stranger Danger"** – Houseparty advertises a feature called "Stranger Danger", which alerts users when individuals they may not know enter their room. It warns against strangers.
- **Location sharing** – Location Sharing is an option to add other users who are nearby using a location-based "Near Me" option. This location-based searching should be turned off.

Advice for parents

- Make sure that children 'lock' their chat room.
- Turn off location sharing.
- Discuss with your child the dangers of adding people they don't know or accepting requests from people they don't know.
- Always check with your child about who they are chatting with and what types of conversations are taking place.
- Use the Houseparty security features – using the features mentioned above can help protect your child.
- Set up parental controls on their devices to control the level of security.
- Talk to your child about building up their digital resilience and critical thinking – as another way to highlight the need to help them cope with whatever the online world throws at them.

The current most popular apps for video-based social networks are Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Houseparty. For further advice about Social Media, apps and games, please visit https://www.commonsensemedia.org/