

Chat and Instant Messaging

What is instant messaging?

Instant messaging (IM) is a form of real-time text-based communication conveyed over a network, such as the internet, between two or more people on a user's contact list. Examples include Windows Live Messenger, Jabber, ICQ and AIM. IM technologies often include additional features that make them even more popular such as having the ability to talk directly for free; to share files; or to view the other party through a webcam.

What is a buddy list?

In instant messaging applications, a buddy list is a list of a user's contacts that they converse with through instant messaging. On such lists users can view if their contacts are online, offline, online but busy etc. Users can block contacts that they no longer wish to talk to.

What is a chat room?

A chat room is an online forum where people can chat online (talk by broadcasting messages to people on the same forum in real time). Sometimes these venues are moderated either by limiting who is allowed to speak (not common), or by having moderation volunteers patrol the venue watching for disruptive or otherwise undesirable behaviour.

Are there different kinds of chat room?

Yes, there are three main types of chat room:

- Internet Relay Chat (IRC) – the oldest and still popular form of chat room is the text-based variety. It is a real time form of synchronised internet chat. It's specific purpose is group communication in discussion forums or channels, however it also has the capacity for one-to-one communication via private message.
- 2D Visual Chat Rooms e.g. The Palace or The Manor – such chat rooms provide a virtual world or graphic background that a user's avatar can navigate. These environments are capable of incorporating elements such as games and educational material most often developed by individual site owners, who have a more in depth knowledge of the system. Some visual chat rooms also incorporate audio and video communications, so that users can see and hear each other.
- 3D Visual Chat Rooms e.g. Habbo Hotel– These are very similar to the 2D variety except that they utilise 3D graphics. This allows the user a more realistic interaction with the environment. The most popular environments also allow users to create or build their own spaces.

What is an avatar?

An avatar is a graphical representation of a user. It can take the form of a 3D model of the user e.g. in computer games or a 2D icon e.g. on internet forums, chat rooms and instant messenger.

Why do children use chat rooms?

Chat rooms are usually areas where people meet to chat as they would in the real world in a youth club or bar. Young people love them because they are often unrestricted; and they can be exciting places to meet old and new friends.

Why do children use instant messenger?

Instant messenger is one of the most popular ways of chatting for young people. Often known as IM, this involves two or more people being online at the same time, and is different from chat rooms, because the people involved can only chat to people who are on their contact list. Young people often feel that they can talk more intimately in this environment, and often use their own text style language to do so.

What are the risks to children when using chat rooms or instant messenger?

Although chatting online can be great fun, young people can sometimes find themselves in situations where they can feel out of their depth. Risks can arise when young people give out their personal details to strangers. The online world can often seem very different to the real world for young people, and they can be tempted to say and do things that they wouldn't dream of if they met someone face to face. This can include giving out personal information such as mobile numbers and pictures of themselves. If they are talking to another child there is a risk that they will misuse this information—for example, by texting abusive messages to the child, or by posting their image on a website; but there is obviously a greater risk if the person that they are chatting to is an adult.

Unfortunately, paedophiles—adults who want to meet young people for sex—use the internet, often with the intention of talking with and meeting a child. Young people can be naive to this risk, and often feel that they are invincible, or that 'they would know if someone was lying'. Young people will often 'swap friends' through IM, and therefore can be chatting to strangers who they feel they trust because a friend of a friend knows them. IM is a very intimate form of communication—more so than a chat room with many participants, and therefore child abusers will often use this as a means to extract personal information from a young person.

How can I minimise the risks to my children?

You can minimise the risks by taking the following simple measures with your children: It is vital that you know if your child uses chat applications online, and that you emphasise to them the importance of keeping their personal information personal.

- If your child uses IM then it is a good idea to ask them to show you how it works—in this way you can also gauge who they have on their contact list and if there is anyone how they don't know in the real world.
- It is also a good idea to ask them if they know how to block someone who they no longer wish to talk to.
- You can also direct them to the Thinkuknow website, where they can watch films and play games on how to stay safer online.
- Consider creating some family rules which you will all agree to on online use, including not giving out personal information, or talking to strangers without discussing it.
- Remind your children that they should never meet up with someone that they have met online without you or another adult going with them.

What should I do if I am still concerned?

If you are concerned that your child may be at risk, it may be necessary to log or monitor their conversations, and this can be done through some forms of filtering software - but this should be considered carefully, since a child may feel that they have to hide more from their parents if they think they are not trusted. GetNetWise has lists of filtering and monitoring software.

If you think your child may be in touch with an adult online make a report or call 999 if they are at immediate risk.