

‘Stalking risk’ for children using Snapchat tracker

Parents are being warned a new social media feature that pinpoints a user’s location could be exploited by strangers

Mary O’Connor

Young people are putting themselves at risk of being stalked and bullied if they use a new social media application that could allow strangers to discover their exact location.

Snapchat, the photo and video-sharing app that has more than 10m UK users, launched its Snap Map feature last month. It tracks the phone’s GPS information to plot users’ exact, real-time location on a map.

The feature was criticised by Vicki Shotbolt, chief executive of Parent Zone, which helps parents understand the digital world, as a “threat to children’s security”.

Shotbolt, who also acts as a government adviser on children’s use of the internet, said: “[Snap Map] feeds directly into that fear of missing out [Fomo] issue. For a young person who is feeling vulnerable already, or may be excluded from their friend group . . . it’s inevitably going to make them feel bad.

“We very rarely say this, but in this instance we are saying, ‘This feature is adding nothing to your life and it’s a threat to your security, so turn it off.’”

On Snap Map a child is represented by an animated character of their choosing, called a Bitmoji. The child can select whether they want the character to be visible to all their Snapchat friends, visible to certain friends only or hidden. The last, known as Ghost mode, is the default setting.

Last week Nadia Sawalha, 52, a panelist on the television programme *Loose Women*, slammed Snap Map as “danger-

ous” and warned that children, including her 14-year-old daughter Maddie, were “growing up without any sense of what privacy means”.

The actress voiced her concerns that children were being put at risk by allow-

A Snapchat function called Our Story, which used to show collections of videos and photos linked to a place, is now combined with Snap Map to show exactly where and when the clips were taken. They disappear after 24 hours or can be removed sooner.

Police were able to pinpoint where videos of an 18-month-old toddler, a two-year-old girl and teenagers drinking alcohol at parties had been made. They set up a dummy account to watch the clips.

Detective Constable Ian Turnbull, from Cleveland police, urged parents and children using Snap Map to protect themselves with Ghost mode, which hides their location.

He said: “This becomes a problem with, predominantly, children, who might accept any [Snapchat] friend request.”

ing their exact location to be shared with a large list of Snapchat friends. In many cases these could include strangers or online acquaintances they have never met in real life.

“My daughter has 80 friends on Snapchat. I’ve literally met five or 10 of those,” she said. “To me a friend is someone who has come round to our house, and I know and have spoken to one of their parents.



Another of her friends has 1,000.”

Sawalha and her daughter, who is home-schooled, are also worried about the potential for bullying and peer pressure. “I’m sure [Snapchat] will say it’s been tested, but to actually be in the head of a 14-year-old girl who knows that all her friends are at a party and that she’s not, that’s quite different.

“Maddie also said sometimes she tells her friends she doesn’t want to go out because she’s busy, but she’s now worried they will be able to know she’s doing nothing [if her location is enabled].”

Dame Esther Rantzen, founder of Childline, the helpline for children, said there were “dangers” for young people “who might think someone is a friend when they are not”.

Rachael Dyer, family support coordinator at Leighton Academy school in Crewe, said she was worried very young children could be at risk, although in theory users of Snapchat must be aged 13 or over.

“If the children weren’t as tech-savvy as we’ve made them, who knows what could have happened? I am worried very young children could be using the service,” she said.

Snapchat said the safety of all its users was “very important”, adding: “We routinely work with law enforcement and safety experts and will continue to do so – and encourage a public conversation about ways to use the Map safely, as intended.”

@marycoconnor

**WE'RE
WATCHING
YOU AND
WE KNOW
WHERE
YOU ARE**





Nadia Sawalha with her 14-year-old daughter, Maddie

ALL ABOUT SNAP MAP AND HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

How to open it

Snap Map screen will open within Snapchat when you pinch your fingers together on the screen



How it works

It includes settings that can reveal your location to 'friends'

It tracks the phone's GPS information to plot the user's real-time position



Users are represented as animated Bitmoji characters

How to stay hidden

The default setting is Ghost mode, which prevents your location being shared. If you do not want to be seen, make sure you do not switch it off



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Minimum age to open a Snapchat account

