At National Online Safety we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information they need to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one platform of many which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.



The latest digital trend growing in popularity for our children are apps on their phone or tablet that look like one thing but are secretly hiding another purpose. They first became particularly popular in 2016. However, children are becoming more and more familiar with 'secret' photo hiding apps, where an app which looks relatively ordinary is actually a hidden gateway to private photos and videos. These apps allow their users to hide images, videos and notes within the app which is also passcode protected. One of the most common types of hidden app used is a 'fake calculator' app however many others are also available.



What parents need to know about HIDDEN PHOTO APPS

MAY HIDE 'SEXTING'

The most common use for the apps is to hide 'sexting' images which young people may be sending or receiving. This problem is growing rapidly amongst students, and from an increasingly early age. Not only is sexting dangerous, but it is illegal when it involves a minor even if both the sender and receiver are underage. By storing and sending these images, young people should be aware that they are committing a crime.



PRIVACY RISK

If you are aware that your children are using the app, you should read the small-print in the usage policy/terms and conditions to ensure the developers do not have access to any of the images stored on the device. If the photos are linked to a cloud storage, then the images stored are also in danger of being released if the application is compromised/hacked.

ENCOURAGE IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Young people tend to act more impulsively if they believe that their behaviour will go unnoticed and remain secret, so often they will produce content for these apps thinking that it will be safe. Let's face it, how many adults read all the small print in the terms and conditions, so why would we expect our children to.

BYPASS PARENTAL CONTROLS

Although these apps are not specifically 'targeting' their advertisements towards children, they can generally be used by anyone over the age of 4. This means that these apps will not be blocked automatically by parental controls. Whilst online platforms, such as Apple, have removed these apps on numerous occasions from their app store, due to their popularity and potential profitability for creators, they continue to be produced and find their way into the stores or available for download.

FAKE/DECOY PASSWORDS

Some of the most secure apps that are available offer the ability to set-up a decoy feature as an added layer of security. This allows the user to provide a fake password which, when used, directs people to a decoy folder containing content of the user's choice or just stock photos. The real password provides access to the secret folder within the app.

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Safety Tips For Parents

TRY TO REMAIN VIGILANT

There is a natural human instinct to believe that what we see on screen is real and accurate. If you are concerned that your child might be using secret apps, you may want to look at their phone. The search feature on a device can be used to type keywords such as 'secret', 'hidden' and 'photo vault'. On iOS, this can be done by swiping down on the home screen to open a search bar. If the app appears and says 'Open' then the app is installed. If it says 'Get' then it is not installed. On an android device, you can go to the apps menu and use the search bar at the top of the screen.

QUESTION THE AUTHENTICITY OF DUPLICATE APPS

You should be aware that almost every mobile device will have pre-installed apps, such as notes and calculator, so the first major warning sign would be to look for duplicates of these apps. By default, the pre-installed apps are almost always displayed on the first page of the home screen.

Default iOS Calculator

Examples of Hidden Calculator Apps

DISCUSS THE DANGERS OF 'SEXTING'

Ensure your child is aware of the dangers of sexting, and how it is illegal to keep or distribute images of minors. Try to talk to your children in a positive way a nd encourage them to take control of their online persona and what they are posting to others. Remind them that they always have a choice and that they can say no to anything that makes them feel even the slightest bit uncomfortable.

LOOK OUT FOR IN-BUILT 'HIDDEN' FEATURES

iPhones have the option to lock notes within the default Notes app. Users can paste images into a note file and lock it using Touch/Face ID and a password. In addition, iOS allows their users to move images to a Hidden folder in the photos app. When an image is moved to the hidden folder, it is removed from the 'All Photos' folder. To find this folder, open the 'Photos' app, scroll down and click 'Hidden'. Users may also create folders to try and hide the app on their home screen or on a second or third page. If you see a folder on your child's device, ensure you check each page for hidden apps.

CONTROL APP USAGE

If your child's iOS device is linked to your Apple ID account, you are able to set a password for downloading apps which only you know. This will mean every-time your child tries to download an app, they will need your password to do so. If you do not have access to your child's Apple ID, you can delete the app without a passcode. This will delete any images stored on the app and will not be recoverable, even if the app is redownloaded.

Meet our expert



Emma Davis is a cyber security expert and former ICT teacher. She delivers cyber awareness training to organisations nationally and has extensive knowledge and experience of managing how children access services and apps online.

SOURCES: https://www.businessinsider.my/apple-pulls-private-photos-calculator-from-app-store-2018-4/, https://smartsocial.com/private-photo-calculator-app/, https://offspring.lifehacker.com/is-your-teen-hiding-sexting-photos-in-a-fake-calculator-1829529749

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