

A Reminder About Kik And Age Restrictions

Kik is an anonymous online messaging service, with limited verifications systems in place. A user is able to sign up without providing any details other than a user name. It's simple to lie about personal details. This has led to the app unfortunately becoming a haven for sexting, illegal activity, and content inappropriate to its age restriction of 13+. With message content **only** being stored **on** the individual users' device, and not **on** the platforms servers accountably for activity is close to zero.

An Australian mother, recently quoted in a major Australian newspaper, was horrified when she performed an internet activity check **on** her daughters' device. What she discovered was a series of inappropriate "grooming" messages between her 12-year-old daughter and several men claiming to be at least 25. These interactions were peppered with requests to meet, asks for her daughters' address, and included a series of pornographic images (young girls engaging in sexual acts with considerably older men). All typical **online** predator behaviours.

Her daughter was frightened by the discourse she had started and deeply disturbed by what she had seen. This led her to delete the app- but she had been unwilling to talk to her mother about this due to her embarrassment and disgust.

Her mother is of the opinion that the situation could easily have gone further had her daughter not disengaged from Kik, and as a result the family has started an **online** petition requesting the Federal government take steps to block access to this platform, and ban the app. This may be an unlikely result, but the content so easily viewed **on** Kik should really see a rise in the age restrictions to 17+.

The definition of a 12+ app and what you could be expected to see in the content, as cited in iTunes app store is as follows :

"12+ Applications in this category may also contain infrequent mild language, frequent or intense cartoon, fantasy or realistic violence, and mild or infrequent mature or suggestive themes, and simulated gambling which may not be suitable for children under the age of 12."

This is not what was appearing **on** KIK. To use the iTunes definition again, to indicate that the age restrictions **on** Kik be raised to 17+ read the following, again from the iTunes app store:

17+ You must be at least 17 years old to purchase this application.
Applications in this category may also contain frequent and intense offensive language; frequent and intense cartoon, fantasy or realistic violence; and frequent and intense mature, horror, and suggestive themes; plus sexual content,

nudity, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs which may not be suitable for children under the age of 17.

All devices have been confiscated in the home, and internet access has been restricted as a result. The mother has also reported the incident to the police, the recommended step to take in similar circumstances.

There are some learning points to take away from this story.

- The nature of Kik and the guaranteed anonymity makes its 13+ age restriction unsafe. A minimum 17+ restriction should be considered by all parents when allowing their child to use this app.
- Parents should regularly check their child's online activity, and have regular conversations about internet safety and security.
- Parents need to do their own homework about the apps their children download. Each app holds different risks, and needs different security protocols. Inform yourself and discuss what you learn with your child.
- Any app which holds anonymity as a feature should be very carefully looked at. Messaging communications are often risky and unpleasant when there is no accountability for the sender.
- Report incidents of a similar nature to the police. Remind your child that by being brave enough to speak up, they may be saving other individuals from harm.

Teens and tweens often refrain from telling their parents about bad online experiences out of shame and fear that they may be banned from their device. Much of a young person's social life is conducted online today and the worry they may be cut off from their peers can cause them to keep silent. ***(While banning usage completely may make a parent feel safer and pro-active, such an action is often counter-productive, inadvertently teaching a child to hide their activities and problems online to avoid such a ban).*** Not all apps are suitable for younger people. Almost all online users will be exposed to an element of risk at some point, this will not always equate to harm. Educating a child and yourself about what to expect from their online life and what actions to take in a variety of scenarios will help protect them now and in the future.

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