



# What Parents & Carers Need to Know about CHATROULETTE



In the words of its creator, Chatroulette “pairs random users for webcam-based conversations”. Reporting more than two million monthly users, it claims to be the largest random video chat website worldwide. Users are matched arbitrarily (hence ‘roulette’) and can end a video chat whenever they like – at which point, they are connected (again, at random) to someone new. Once considered outdated, Chatroulette unexpectedly flourished in the early months of lockdown, with the number of daily users doubling to above 100,000.

## Adult Content

Chatroulette is strongly associated with adult content. Following its launch in 2009, inappropriate – usually sexual – content was reported to have rapidly become ‘rampant’ on the site. An early study found that one in eight matches on Chatroulette involved someone naked, exposing themselves or engaging in a sexual act. Our researcher found that this ratio is now closer to seven out of eight.

## Blackmail Scams

It’s not especially difficult for another Chatroulette user to record the feed from your webcam. Scammers have been known to lure people into committing a compromising act during a video call (often using an attractive, flirtatious accomplice as a ‘honey trap’) and then threaten to release the footage to their friends and family, in an attempt to blackmail them.

## Mobile Chatroulette

Parents should be aware that young people can now access Chatroulette via their phones. Although it does not have an app of its own, Chatroulette can be streamed through Minichat (on iOS devices) and OmeTV (on Android). The minimum age to download either app is 17, but the verification is far from robust: if they were determined to use the service, a child could simply input a fake age.



## Anonymous Chat Partners

The site doesn’t require users to register any personal details (nor indeed to verify their age). It is also possible for someone to use ‘fake webcam’ software to hide their identity with face-changing filters and effects. This relative anonymity can embolden users to do or say extreme things on the platform. Bear in mind that, when a person ends a chat, they do not know – and cannot control – who they are going to interact with next.

## Damaging Self-Esteem

Many users purposely go on Chatroulette to mock, insult and ridicule other people. In addition to this kind of deliberate trolling, the ease with which someone can end a call and move on to the next chat participant can lead to a continued sense of rejection. We would advise that anyone who suffers from self-esteem issues or low self-confidence should avoid using Chatroulette.

## Hacking Potential

Although Chatroulette does not collect information such as your name or email address, the site *does* let people discover your IP address if they know how to look. Armed with that information, a hacker can attempt to connect directly to your home network and begin probing it for possible security weaknesses that they can then exploit.

## Advice for Parents & Carers

### Choose the Correct Category

Recent modifications have now divided chats into three categories: ‘Filtered’, where no sexual content is allowed; ‘Unfiltered’, where participants are asked to adhere to safe content (this is not enforced and relies on users’ honour and honesty); and ‘Random’, which comes with a clear warning that it may contain adult material. Under-18s are not allowed in these latter two types of chat.

### Block and Report

If three users complain about the same individual within a five-minute period, that person is temporarily banned from Chatroulette. Anyone using the site should familiarise themselves with the reporting process. As a general rule (not relating specifically to this site), try to ensure that your child knows how to report inappropriate or offensive behaviour in any app, game or site that they use.

### Consider the Consequences

If you have an older child, you could talk to them about Chatroulette and apps like it. Explain the possibility of being recorded doing anything on webcam (even as an adult) that could be used against them or could subsequently damage their digital footprint. It might be a slightly awkward conversation to have, but you’ll be insulating them against even worse embarrassment in the future.

### Disable the Camera and Mic

If you do not allow your microphone and webcam to be activated when Chatroulette requests it, then the site will not pair up you up with another user. Covering up the webcam would also protect privacy effectively – however, other users will tend to aggressively question this action and most likely become very offensive on the audio.

### Explore Alternatives

Despite its recent revisions, we would still strongly suggest that Chatroulette is *not* a site to be used by minors. Indeed, we would recommend that even adults proceed with extreme caution if using it. If a young person is adamant that they want to use a video chat service, then do some research and look at what else is available – there are lots of child-friendly alternatives out there.

## Meet Our Expert

Jonathan Taylor is an expert on online safety, social media and online grooming, having previously been a covert internet investigator with the Metropolitan Police for more than 10 years. He has worked extensively with UK and international schools to deliver training and guidance around the latest apps, platforms and dangers.



SOURCES: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/chatroulette-resurrected-as-users-double-under-coronavirus-stay-at-home-orders>, <https://techcrunch.com/2010/03/16/chatroulette-stats-male-perverts/>