A parent's 'need to know' guide to free games/social media apps popular with children...

Why we need to know:

Permission to download and play on an App, that "everyone else at school!" is playing or talking about, is an increasingly frequent request from children to adults. Apps on tablets and phones can be a great way for our children to amuse themselves for a short period of time, to keep in touch with friends, or to learn new skills e.g. spatial awaress and basic engineering in Minecraft. However, the 'digital culture' that our children are growing up in can also have negative affects, ranging from changes in brain architecture, correlated with amount of time in front of a screen, to increased risk of inappropriate content and/or contact from others.

Below is a small selection of apps that have become popular with young people, and that some children in Bloxham Primary School have access to. There is also a brief description of the nature of the app, the age recommendation given by the developers, and problems that some users/parents have come across related to the app.

The list is far from comprehensive, and much more information can be found with a little time spent researching. A good place to start is: www.commonsensemedia.org, a website that gives both a parent's and a child's perspective on a huge range of media, be it apps, films, or books.

Standard advice from parent educators and child psychologists alike is to educate yourselves, as parents, in order to make **informed** choices with your child when accessing apps that connect with an online community, and to keep all screens out of bedrooms no matter what age we are.

TikTok describes itself as a 'global video community' which merged with musical.ly, a popular karaoke/lip sync app, over the summer. The app is definitely for 13+, and warns of mild language, mature suggestive themes, mild sexual contant and nudity. Musical.ly suffered from online predators, and TikTok has been known for its easy access to pornography. There have also been reports of videos showing self harm. This social media app has over 300 million users per month in China alone.

YouTube is a user generated video sharing site with an age rating of 12+. Although nudity is allegedly banned there are frequent reports of easy access to porn and a lot of 'hate' trolling in the comments section. Again, this app has a huge online community (over 100 hours of video uploaded every minute!) and all advice is that children should only use this app when actively monitored by their parents.

Roblox is a massively multiplayer online gaming platform with at least 70 million users permonth. With the right privacy and parental control settings in place, many see this app as safe for children aged 10+, but parents should be aware that it has been known for having sexual predators targeting children. Online dating has been reported as a trend on Roblox, with underage players unwittingly getting caught in 'sex games' with adult users.

Fortnite is an online video game, a popular version being 'Battle Royale' in which up to 100 players battle to the death. The biggest risk is (apart from exposure to cartoonish violence) the online chat feature. Again, as with any online app known to be popular with children there have been reports of grooming and sexual predators using live unmoderated chat. This game is not recommended for under 12's not only because of violence, but also if headphones are worn then parents cannot hear what comments are being made by other online players.

Snapchat is currently one of the most popular instant messaging apps with teenagers, largely because all activity disappears once viewed by the recipient. Snapchat says "no one under 13 may use the service" however some parents do allow younger children to access the app. Snapchat (and instagram) were found to be the most damaging social media platforms amongst teenagers last year, with links to lowered self esteem, high anxiety and depression. Mature content is frequent, e.g. with the 'Discover' feature.