

## PARENT RESOURCE

### Preventing Children from Interacting with Strangers Online: Omegle, CoolMeet, Chatspin and Other Platforms

Phone and computer applications (Apps) which allow students to engage and talk with complete strangers are increasingly popular among young people. These Apps have few safeguards for children which makes them frighteningly dangerous as they can be exploited by adults with malicious intent for identifying potential targets. Some of the APPs own pages identify that these sites are frequented by child predators who pretend to be a child or adolescent. Ideally, the best way to avoid these dangers is to keep children off these platforms altogether. Omegle is a platform that has recently become popular among teens and children and allows a person to chat with a random stranger without any supervision.

- Omegle allows users to socialize with strangers without sharing personal information.
- It pairs random users in chat set-ups, identified as 'You' and 'Stranger'.
- Invariably, dialogue is initiated by a request for the other person's age, sex and location (ASL) and can be used by adults with malicious intentions to identify potential targets.
- Omegle also offers video chat for adults, but without an effective age gate, underage users can use the site by pretending to be adults.
- In 2012, Omegle added a feature that paired strangers based on shared interests.
- Conversations with strangers can be monitored or unmonitored, depending on the user's preference. But while 'unmonitored' might seem the obvious way to go, users are warned by Omegle of a greater possibility they will find themselves at the receiving end of explicit and inappropriate content when initiating an unmonitored conversation.
- Omegle added a dangerous feature that allows a user to capture a screenshot of the conversation.
- Users can even enter what is known as 'Spy Mode' in Omegle. In 'Spy Mode', they can ask a question to two people engaged in a chat conversation and view their conversation. Alternatively, the 'Spy Mode' feature also allows a user to discuss with another person a question posed by a stranger.
- In 2014, a twenty-two-year-old man sexually assaulted two thirteen-year-old girls he made friends with on Omegle. The girls were lured into a private meeting and later assaulted.
- In 2017, a virtual assailant manipulated two underage girls into engaging in explicit and inappropriate conversations that were later used to threaten the girls.
- Recently, a man from NY travelled to Charlotte for the purpose of engaging in inappropriate activity with a minor, whom he met on Omegle.

Other recently identified applications which allow these types of unsupervised communications and pose a higher potential threat than traditional social media platforms include CoolMeet, ChatHub, Emerald Chat, Chatspin, Shagle, Chatrandom, Dirtyroulette, Camsurf, Bazoocam, Tinychat.

#### Ways parents can safeguard their child online:

- Talk with your child on the dangers of these Apps and communicating with strangers.
- Monitor and supervise the social media and internet applications your child uses.
- Set limits and ground rules for social media and use of internet applications.
- Consider using parental safety and monitoring programs to assist in keeping children safe online.