

Houseparty: what is it and is it safe for young people?



In these strange times, young people can feel very cut off from their friends. Since the coronavirus crisis started, the video-chatting app Houseparty has enjoyed a surge in popularity. It's easy to see why: it enables young people stuck at home to hang out with friends more informally than on other video conferencing apps.

What is it?

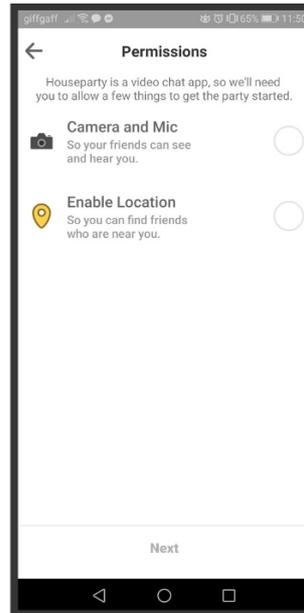
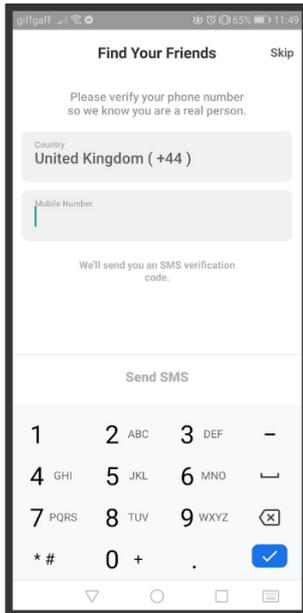
Houseparty is an app that allows up to eight people to have a virtual 'party' via video chat. While it's been fairly popular since its 2016 launch, it's seen a huge increase in downloads since coronavirus took hold and is currently the #1 app on both the App Store and the Google Play Store.

As with an actual house party, you can jump between rooms and come and go as you please. It's received a lot of praise online for being a great tool for impromptu catch-ups and for connecting with friends you might not otherwise call.

One young person told us: "I absolutely love it. Right now, I'm mainly communicating with about five really good mates, but the app helps you touch base with friends who you don't usually ring. It's nice to mix it up a bit!"

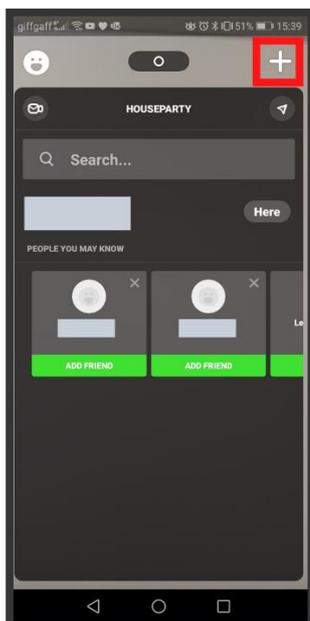
How does it work?

When you download the app, you're asked to give some personal information, including your phone number, so that Houseparty can verify your account and connect to your contacts. You're then prompted to connect your account to other social media platforms, such as Facebook or Snapchat, to detect which of your friends are already on the app. To use the app, you must also give Houseparty permission to access your camera, microphone and location data.



After that, you're free to start a new party and invite your friends by clicking the **'+' symbol** in the top-right corner of the screen. Or you can join an existing party, or jump between parties.

In the app's default mode, any friend of a friend can be invited into a room without an 'admin approval'. This flexibility is one of the app's key selling points. A message will pop up when an unknown person joins, explaining the relationship between the person and the member of the party who invited them. Alternatively, you can lock the room by hitting the **padlock icon** at the bottom of the screen if you want to restrict who can join a party.



How is it different from other video chat services?

Most video chatting services – for instance Zoom, FaceTime and Hangouts – have seen spikes in usage since the outbreak of coronavirus, connecting people who can no longer meet in cafes and other social spaces. Houseparty has two key differences: its ad-hoc, wandering-in nature due to the fact that friends of friends can join in; and the ability to play games while chatting.

With other video services, such as Skype and FaceTime, it's usual to arrange a time for a call. In contrast, Houseparty's drop-in approach encourages users to be spontaneous and to talk to people outside of their immediate social circle. Games are a way to hang out without having a conversational agenda. When you're in a room, you can click the **dice icon** in the top-right corner and start a game such as Trivia or Quick Draw (similar to Pictionary).

What are the downsides?

Feedback from Houseparty's users has been overwhelmingly positive and, after trying the app ourselves, we think there's a lot to like.

One thing that can be slightly annoying, though, is that every time one of your friends opens the app you receive a notification encouraging you to start a conversation. Strangely, Houseparty doesn't have a 'Settings' page, so we haven't been able to find a way to turn the notifications off within the app. They can, however, be disabled from your phone's main settings.

Is it family-friendly?

The app is very easy to use, although it relies heavily on users having a social media presence to connect them to their friends. Both the App Store and Google Play Store's age ratings specify that, like most other social media services, it's meant for an audience of 13 years or older.

In these difficult times, Houseparty can be a great way for your child to keep in touch with their friends and school community.

The parent of a 15-year-old told us: "As a parent, I think it's great! I have overheard some of [my son's] conversations and they're talking about what's going on with the virus, how they're feeling about being stuck at home, and how unfair I am for not letting him go to Tesco and get his favourite drink. But there's also been an awful lot of laughing – I can't imagine what it's like for them not being able to be with each other, so I'm very grateful for it."

It's important to bear in mind that there's a higher chance that your child will be talking to people they might not know well – or to complete strangers – than on some other video services. People's usernames are searchable, even to those they're not friends with on social media, so encourage your child to select an anonymous username and avoid giving any personal information such as their age. It's also a good idea to let them know about the 'lock' function, in case they want to chat undisturbed with their closest friends.