Thinkuknow about… Twitter?

A guide from CEOP's Thinkuknow education programme
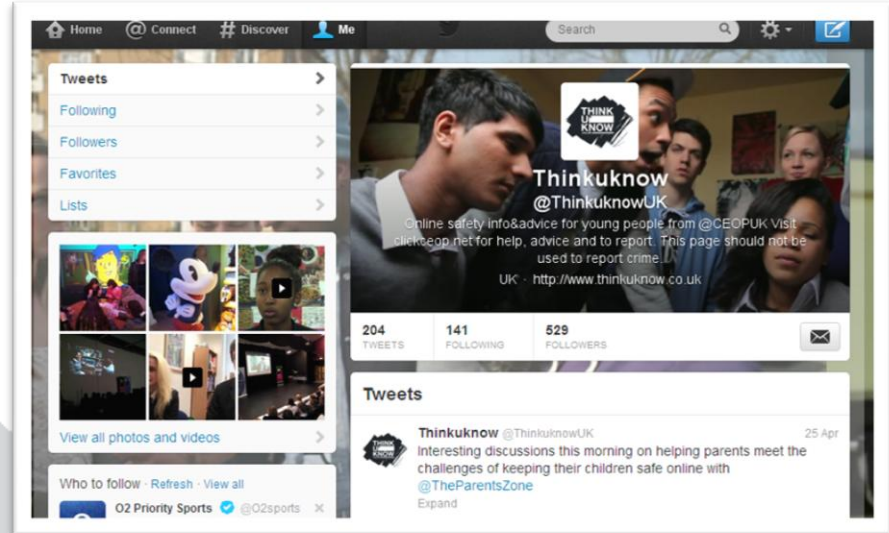
What is it?

Twitter is a popular social network and micro-blogging site that allows users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters, which can include links to web pages, images and videos. It is also possible to share the location of where you are when sending a tweet.

Are there any age restrictions for Twitter?

Twitter doesn't ask for any age verification in its sign-up nor does it reference a minimum age limit in its Terms of Service, to which all users must comply.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) is a piece of American legislation that states that websites allowing children under 13 years old or that collect information from children, must comply with a number of procedures to protect that child's privacy including asking for parental permission and allowing parents access to the information collected about their child etc. This is why many popular social networking sites online have a minimum user age of 13 (often advising parental guidance of use up to 18), so that they are not required to comply with COPPA. This piece of legislation is not enforceable in the UK.

We would recommend that sites such as Twitter and Facebook are not appropriate spaces for primary school children as the social networks are mainly inhabited by adults, and in addition to the risks about inappropriate contact and potential grooming, the content and conversations had on such sites are usually unsuitable for younger users. Ultimately the decision as to whether or not a child under 13 is on Twitter, Facebook and similar sites lies with the child's parent or carer, who hopefully is well informed of the risks and the level of guidance that need to provide to their child should they permit this. We know that more parents and carers are not aware of this and we have created a website with practical information and advice about online safety for them, including films and factsheets they can share with other parents/carers: www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents.

How do privacy settings work on Twitter?

As a Twitter user you have the option to choose whether your tweets are public (the default option) or whether you protect them, so that only people you approve can view your tweets.

Public tweets – anyone can see your tweets, whether or not they have a Twitter account. This means that your tweets can be viewed via search engines, e.g. Google and Bing, or through Twitter's own search functions. This also means that any Twitter accounts you have blocked from contacting you via Twitter are able to view your tweets.

Protected tweets – fellow Twitter users must make a request to you to follow your tweets and interact with you (including sending you a private message or DM, retweeting or sharing your tweets and liking or favouriting your tweets). Each request to follow you requires your approval, and young people should only approve requests from people that they know and trust in the real world. Your tweets are only visible to your approved Twitter followers. Also your tweets are not included in Twitter's Public Timeline, so your tweets are not searchable through search engines or Twitter's own search functions.

If at any point your tweets have been public and searchable the tweets that you made during this time will remain public, even after changing your settings to protect your tweets. If you later choose to make your tweets public again all previously protected tweets will become public and searchable. Wherever you use social networking sites it is important to think before you post and to consider who may be able to view what you post online now and in the future.

It is recommended that young people using Twitter choose to protect their tweets and only allow those who they know and trust to follow and contact them via Twitter. It also recommended that young people do not activate settings which allow their location when sending a tweet to be shared.
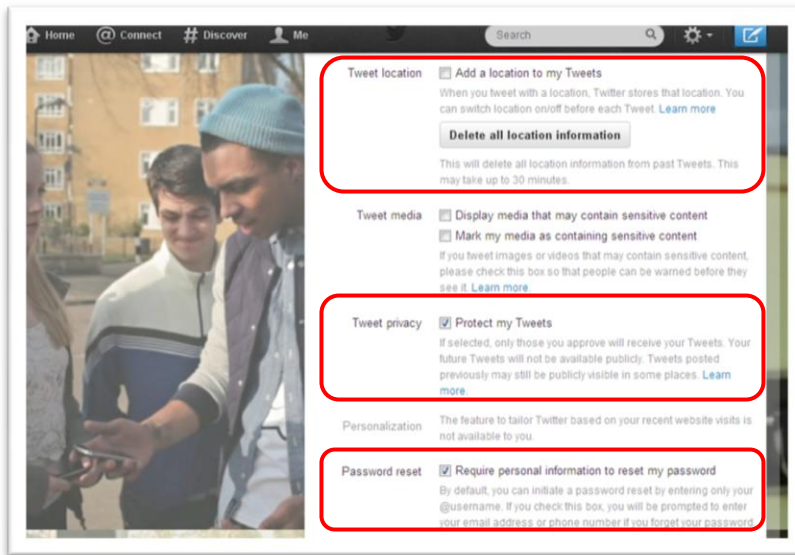
How do I protect my tweets?

When logged in to your Twitter account, click on the Cog icon in the top right hand corner of the page and then choose 'Settings' from the menu.

On the 'Settings' page check the 'Protect my tweets' box and click on the 'Save changes' button at the bottom of the page. It is also a good idea to check the box next to 'Require personal information to reset my password' as this will make it more difficult for your account to be hacked.

On the 'Settings' page you can also choose to share your location when you tweet. It is recommended that young people do not check this box. If you have previously shared your location and no longer want to it is also possible to delete all location information that has been previously shared.

How do I block someone on Twitter?

If you want to stop another Twitter user from following you, retweeting or favouriting your tweets, or sending you a direct message, you can do so by blocking them.

When logged in to your Twitter account, visit the Twitter profile page of the person you want to block. Then click on the person icon on their profile page and choose 'Block' from the options available.

Please remember that if you choose to keep your tweets public anyone can view your tweets, including people without a Twitter account and people that you have blocked on Twitter.
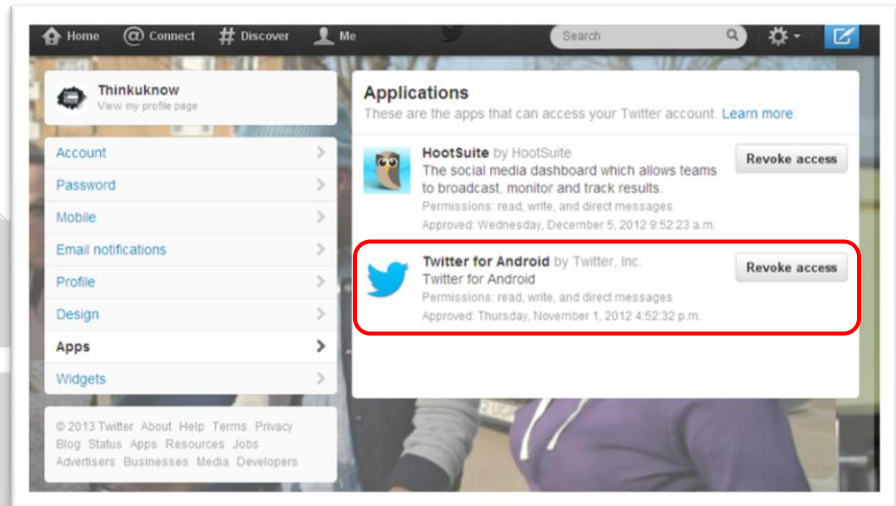
How do I stop a third-party application from having access to my Twitter account?

Many applications have been developed that enable you to use your Twitter account to connect with other sites and services. If you use an application like this you are giving it permission to access your tweets, see who follows you and even to post tweets on your behalf.

To stop a third-party application from accessing your Twitter account, when logged in click on the Cog icon and choose 'Settings' from the menu.

From the menu on the left hand-side choose 'Apps'. To prevent an app from accessing your account click on the 'Revoke access' button next to the app that you want to block.

How can I deactivate my Twitter account?

If you choose to leave Twitter, you can do so by deactivating your account.

When logged in to your Twitter account, click on the Cog icon in the top right hand corner of the page and then choose 'Settings' from the menu.

At the bottom of the 'Settings' page is a 'Deactivate my account' link. By clicking on the link you will be asked to confirm that you want to deactivate your account. 30 days after this request your user data will be permanently deleted.

You should note that even after your Twitter account has been deleted your Twitter account and unprotected tweets may still be searchable on search engines like Google and Bing for some time after until the search engine's information is updated.