

Introducing your child to social media

Is your teen begging you for a social media account? Here's what you should know before they sign up.

Milestones are something that parents monitor and diligently check off from the moment their child is born, so what happens when their teen starts asking for their first social media account? This is a significant and exciting stage in the life of a young person; however, it can also be a confusing time for parents who may be worrying whether their child is fully prepared for this step, or wondering about the best platform with which to start.

Both biological age and level of maturity are good indicators. Although the minimum age for most social media platforms is 13+ years, some parents may find their 13-year-old is not interested (or emotionally ready), while others will have a child who's already been begging to get Instagram for years. One thing is certain, though - once a child has started with social media, it's difficult to pull back, so our online safety experts recommend delaying its use for as long as possible to ensure they are fully prepared.

Before allowing your teen to dive headfirst into the world of social media, it's worth considering and discussing some of the fundamentals, including how they would handle online public criticism, the importance of privacy protection, and your family rules and expectations regarding privacy settings and parental controls. By being upfront and open with your child about your expectations surrounding their social media use, you will create an open dialogue and help facilitate mutual inclusion and respect.

Social media platforms most commonly used by teens:



Although the options for social media platforms may seem limitless, those most commonly used by teenagers are Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube. Children and teens use social media to develop and share interests, have fun, and maintain friendships and relationships, and although there are differences with each platform, a common thread links them: Users create online profiles to chat and interact with others, and they do this through messaging, uploading photos or videos and sharing links that others can like, tag, or share.

To determine which social media platform is right for your child, you will need to think about how they want to use it and which best suits their needs, while helping them to remain as safe as possible online. You will also want to consider which of the platforms have built-in parental controls that will provide you with the level of visibility and management you would like. Getting the privacy settings and built-in safety features right from the start will help make things easier down the line, but fundamentally, creating an open line of communication around social media use with your teen will help alleviate many of the worries surrounding the start of their social media journey.

Features and risks of the top four

Instagram

Risks to consider

- It can be challenging to compel teenagers to keep their Instagram account private, as a public account attracts more people and, therefore, more potential post 'likes'.
- Users can have multiple accounts, and many teens will have one account that their parents know about and another 'finsta' account (usually under a pseudonym or nickname) that is kept secret from their parents (and usually contains content they don't want their parents to know).
- The platform has a reputation for creating and posting content that is 'Insta-worthy,' which can be time-consuming for the creators and lead to self-esteem and validation issues for the consumers. Body image issues have often been reported by young Instagram users, especially those who consume dieting-related content on the platform.
- The Map Search feature requires users to enable geo-location on their device, which can be risky as it can enable others to see where they are.

Positive features

- Users have the option to create a public or a private account. A public account enables all Instagram users to follow and interact with the account owner without needing permission. A private account requires the owner's approval to be added as a follower, which would enable users to view, like, and comment on the account owner's posts.
- Privacy settings can be used to curate who can view a user's accounts and block or restrict others from finding their account on the platform.
- Online bullying is a known risk on Instagram. Users can anonymously [report](#) inappropriate posts that are offensive, harassing, bullying, or violate Instagram's community guidelines.
- Account owners can use word filters to audit the comments on their posts. Comments that contain the flagged words won't appear. They can also delete posts entirely and filter which profiles can comment on their posts. This can be particularly useful in preventing bullying.
- The Take a Break and Daily Limit settings can be used to remind account holders to maintain a balance when they have spent too much time on the platform.

Online safety expert recommendations for Instagram

Our online safety experts recommend that if your teen wants to create an Instagram account, you help them learn how to maintain firm control over who has access to their content and information on the platform by ensuring their account is set to 'private' and that any unwanted profiles are blocked. They should also only add account followers they know in real life. Help them with their Take a Break and Daily Limit settings, ensure they keep geo-location turned off, and that they know how to report inappropriate content to the platform. Lastly, have an open conversation about your expectations regarding their Instagram use, including the risks of having multiple accounts and the reality of creating picture-perfect content.

TikTok

Risks to consider

- Users don't need an account to access TikTok's content, but they will need to set one up if they wish to post their own content, comment on posts or interact with others on the platform. As well as the app, TikTok's content can be accessed through a browser or on other social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.
- Account owners can set their account to public or private by choice. Users between 13 and 15 years have their accounts set to private and those 16 and over to public by default; however, both of these settings can be easily changed. Users who are over 16 years can use TikTok LIVE to live stream video posts.
- Personal information (including age) is not verified when an account is created, making it easy for those on the platform to potentially misrepresent themselves, placing teens at risk of being targeted by inappropriate adults and online predators.
- Anyone using the platform can find and interact with those who have a public account. Private accounts can be set to 'Friends Only' or 'No One' to restrict access accordingly.
- If a phone number is provided when the account is set up, the account owner may be contactable via the messenger feature.
- The objective of many teens using the platform is to become TikTok famous, which requires a public account in order to amass a large number of followers.
- With its short, dynamic videos, TikTok has been designed to hook its users, and keep them there as long as possible. The algorithm cleverly curates a content feed specific to each individual user and is designed to keep them on the platform long and often, increasing their overall screen time.
- Although many of the posts on TikTok are fun and entertaining, it also contains highly inappropriate content, including profanity, violence, suicide, drug use, nudity, sex, self-harm, and eating disorders. Users are also encouraged to partake in challenges, many of which are risky and dangerous.

- The algorithm that curates a user's TikTok feed relies strongly on highly specific individual data collection to create an accurate personal profile. In the US, this includes biometric data like facial and voice recognition.

Positive features

- The platform generally features everyday people with less focus on online 'perfection'.
- When used appropriately, TikTok can be a fantastic place for users to showcase their talents or learn something new.
- TikTok's Family Pairing feature enables parents to have some control and visibility over their teen's account, including the privacy and safety settings.
- The platform contains search interventions for some triggering topics such as #suicide (users will be shown content for appropriate support services instead); however, most teens are highly adept at circumventing these types of safety features. Content relating to eating disorders is common on TikTok, and the platform has recently introduced a Safety Center Guide to help educate users about this topic.

Online safety expert recommendations for TikTok

If your teen wants to set up a TikTok account, our online safety experts recommend you take an active role in helping them set it up. To enable the automatic safety and privacy settings, be sure they enter their correct birth year, that their account is set to private and that they have limited their account interaction to 'Friends'. They should also only add friends they know in real life. Ensure Family Pairing is activated to help monitor their TikTok settings and activity and have an open conversation regarding their TikTok use, including what to do if they see something that makes them feel uncomfortable, and how to [report](#) inappropriate content or behavior.

Snapchat

Risks to consider

- Snapchat is an unmoderated platform, posing a greater risk for teens to view inappropriate content. One of the platform's main features is disappearing messages and content that stays visible for a limited time (24 hours), making it more tempting for users to upload risky, or offensive posts, including nudes and content used to bully others online. This feature also makes it extremely difficult for parents to monitor their teen's platform use. Many users are not aware that other users can now save Snaps on their own devices.
- The Snap Map feature enables users to share their exact location with others ranging from specific friends to their entire contact list, creating a significant safety risk. When Ghost Mode is activated, others can no longer see the user's location, but can still request it to be shared.

- The My Eyes Only feature enables users to create content they don't wish others to see, making it difficult for parents to monitor their teen's Snapchat content and activity.
- There can be significant pressure placed on teens to maintain their Snapchat Scores and Streaks, creating issues with anxiety and excessive screen time.
- Depending on privacy settings (Everyone, Friends, or Only Me), the Cameos feature can enable users to use the images of other Snapchat account owners in their Cameos creations without permission; therefore, teens could potentially feature in the content of complete strangers.
- Snapchat Discover is a curated feed of content that is designed to appeal to the user, to help keep them on the platform, increasing their risk of excessive screen time.
- The featured filters and lenses have been known to cause some users to prefer the way they look on Snapchat to real life, creating significant self-esteem and anxiety issues.

Positive features

- Account holders posting to Snapchat Stories can choose to do so publicly or privately. Private posts default to the user's entire contact list, but can be adjusted if the user chooses, giving them much more control over where their content ends up.
- Family Center (Snapchat's parental control feature) gives parents some limited visibility over how their children interact on the platform; however, to gain access, both parent and child must mutually enable it. Family Center allows parents to see their child's contacts list and who they have interacted with over the past seven days, but not what they have said. Parents can also use it to report any suspicious accounts they notice in their child's contacts.

Online safety expert recommendations for Snapchat

If your teen has asked to have a Snapchat account, our online safety experts recommend you help them set it up to ensure the appropriate privacy and security settings are enabled. Snap Map should always be in Ghost Mode and your teen made aware that they should never share their location through the platform, even if asked by a known friend. All other features should be set to 'Only Me' or 'Friends' and your teen should know only to add friends to their account they know in real life. Have an open discussion with your teen regarding their Snapchat use, with particular regard to the risks involved with filters and lenses, and the disappearing messages and content features. They should be aware that posts can now be saved by users and that once something is uploaded online, it never truly goes away. They should also know what to do if they see something on Snapchat makes them feel uncomfortable, as well as how to [report](#) inappropriate content or behavior.

YouTube

Risks to consider

- Predators have been known to reach out to children to try and persuade them to engage on another platform that is more conducive to private chatting.
- YouTube content features a large number of ads that can take users to another (potentially inappropriate) platform or site if clicked, or may contain in-app purchases.
- There is a genuine danger of teens exceeding their screen time limit while using YouTube. The Take a Break feature can be employed to remind users that they have been on the platform for a specified time (controlled in the settings) by pausing the video.

Positive features

- Users don't need to have an account and can be of any age to access YouTube content via a browser; however, they must be 13 years or older to set up an account via the app, create content and live stream. There is the option to set up a Parent Supervised User Account or a YouTube family account, to enable parents to have greater visibility over their teen's YouTube use. There are also several other parental controls that are currently in the Beta testing phase.
- YouTube can be a fantastic platform for users of all ages to access information or learn new skills. The platform contains a vast amount of content; however, parents and young users need to be aware that much of it is inappropriate for those under 18 years.
- The comments section is notorious for online bullying, rudeness, and inappropriate language; however, creators can take advantage of various built-in filters to moderate comments or disable comments entirely.
- Restricted mode will disable the messaging and chat features and help filter inappropriate content; however, some users are adept at disguising such content in seemingly innocent videos, so this feature is not completely foolproof.
- YouTube has a number of more content-specific subsidiary apps, giving parents greater choice about how their children use the platform. These include: YouTube Music, YouTube Kids, YouTube TV, and YouTube Studio, some of which require a paid subscription to access.

Online safety expert recommendations for YouTube

We strongly recommend parents set up a Parent Supervised user account or Family YouTube account if your teen wants to use this platform. For greater privacy and safety, Restricted mode should be enabled and the chat and messaging functions disabled. Due to the large number of ads that appear on YouTube, parents should disable in-app purchases on their child's device, and encourage their teen to use the Take a Break feature to ensure they don't exceed their screen time limits. They should also talk openly about interacting with strangers online, and [what to do](#) if they view inappropriate content, including nasty comments.

Social media platforms to avoid

When used appropriately and safely, social media can be a wonderful way for your teen to connect and interact online with their peers in a positive way; however, there are some social media platforms our online safety experts definitely don't recommend for those who are under 18 years of age.

Omegle

Omegle's tagline is 'Talk to strangers', which should be a clear indicator that the site is not safe for children of any age to use. The platform randomly pairs users with strangers to text or video chat; however, it is frequented by predators and rife with inappropriate content. Please see our Omegle [deep dive](#) for more information.

OnlyFans

OnlyFans is a subscription-based social media platform that was originally designed to help online creators monetize their content; however, unfortunately, the content has evolved to be largely sexually explicit in nature, and not appropriate for underage viewing. As it is subscription-based, there is a monetary cost involved. Although users must be over 18 years of age to set up a membership, underage users commonly bypass the age verification process using a simple fake ID and prepaid VISA card.

Should parents keep their children off social media altogether?

Social media is now firmly ingrained into our everyday lives. It appears in apps, television shows, games, and the classroom, and even more importantly, most children experience social media every day through us, their parents. So it is important to remember that if you decide to ban social media altogether, you are not only denying your teen an elementary aspect of today's social culture but are also not adequately preparing them for the time when they will become a part of that culture themselves. It can be daunting to expose your child to the risks social media brings. By starting out small and slow with a closely monitored shared family account, you will enable them to learn how to keep themselves safe online and to know exactly what to do and what not to in order to experience the positive aspects of social media while keeping safety risks at bay.

www.interactionservices.org/online-safety-training