

Social Media Tools Parents Need to Know About

The key thing about keeping your children safe on-line is making yourself aware of the tools and apps they are using. The article below identifies some features of the applications your child may well be using on a regular basis. Entering into discussions with your child regarding the legal, moral and safety issues with each of these apps is a good starting point to making sure your child remains safe on-line.



If you are reading this document on-line clicking on the green text will take you to more information about that specific app.

Apps that let users text, video chat, shop, and share their pics and videos are attracting teenagers. Be aware that some of these apps also allow for PM (private messaging) to take place. This is an aspect all parents should be aware of as this method of contact is often used in attempts to 'groom' youngsters.



1. **Twitter** is a microblogging site that allows users to post brief, 140-character messages -- called "tweets" -- and follow other users' activities. Teens like using it to share quick tidbits about their lives with friends. It's also great for keeping up with what's going on in the world -- breaking news, celebrity gossip, etc.

What parents need to know

Public tweets are the norm for teens. You can choose to keep your tweets private but most teens have public accounts. Talk to your kids about what they post and how a post can spread far and fast.

Updates appear immediately. Even though you can remove tweets, your followers can still read what you wrote until it's gone. This can get kids in trouble if they say something in the heat of the moment.



2. **Instagram** is a platform that lets users snap, edit, and share photos and 15-second videos either publicly or with a network of followers. Instagram unites the most popular features of social media sites: sharing, seeing, and commenting on photos. Instagram also lets you apply fun filters and effects to your photos, making them look high quality and artistic.

What parents need to know

Teens are on the lookout for "Likes." Similar to Facebook, teens may measure the "success" of their photos, even their self-worth, by the number of likes or comments they receive. Posting a photo or video can be problematic if teens post it to validate their popularity.

Public photos are the default. Photos and videos shared on Instagram are public and may have location information unless privacy settings are adjusted. Hashtags can make photos even more visible to communities beyond a teen's followers.

Mature content can slip in. The terms of service specify that users should be at least 13 years old and shouldn't post partially nude or sexually suggestive photos but they don't address violence, swear words, or drugs.



3. **Snapchat** is a messaging app that lets users put a time limit on the pictures and videos they send before they disappear. Snapchat's creators intended the app's fleeting images to be a way for teens to share fun, light moments without the risk of having them go public. And that's what most teens use it for: sending goofy or embarrassing photos to one another.

What parents need to know

It's a myth that Snapchats go away forever. Data is data: Whenever an image is sent, it never truly goes away (for example, the person on the receiving end can take a screenshot of the image before it disappears.) Snapchats can even be recovered.

It can make sexting seem OK. The seemingly risk-free messaging might encourage users to share pictures containing inappropriate content.

tumblr.



4. **Tumblr** is like a cross between a blog and Twitter: It's a streaming scrapbook of text, photos, and/or videos and audio clips. Users create and follow short blogs, or "tumblelogs," that can be seen by anyone online (if made public). Many teens have tumblrs for personal use -- sharing photos, videos, musings, and things they find funny with their friends.

What parents need to know

Inappropriate images are easy to find. This online hangout is hip and creative but sometimes raunchy. Pornographic images and videos, depictions of violence, self-harm, drug use, and offensive language are easily searchable.

Posts are often copied and shared. Reblogging on Tumblr is similar to re-tweeting: A post that's reblogged from one tumblelog then appears on another. Many teens like, and in fact want, their posts reblogged. But do you really want your kids' words and photos on someone else's page?



5. **Google+** is Google's social network, which is now open to teens. It has attempted to improve on Facebook's friend concept, using "circles" that give users more control about what they share with whom. Teens aren't wild about Google+ yet. But many feel that their parents are more accepting of it because they associate it with schoolwork. One popular aspect of Google+ is the addition of real-time video chats in Hangouts (virtual gatherings with approved friends).

What parents need to know

Teens can limit who sees certain posts by using "circles." Friends, acquaintances, and the general public can all be placed in different circles. If you're friends with your kid on Google+, know that you may be in a different "circle" than their friends (and therefore seeing different information).

Google+ takes teens' safety seriously. Google+ created age-appropriate privacy default settings for any users whose registration information shows them to be teens. It also automatically reminds them about who may be seeing their posts (if they're posting on public or extended circles).

Data tracking and targeting are concerns. Google+ activity (what you post and search for and who you connect with) is shared across Google services including Gmail and YouTube. This information is used for targeting ads to the user. Users can't opt out of this type of sharing across Google services.



6. **Vine** is a social media app that lets users post and watch looping six-second video clips. This Twitter-owned service has developed a unique community of people who post videos that are often creative and funny, and sometimes thought-provoking. Videos run the gamut from stop-motion clips of puzzles doing and undoing themselves to six-second skits showing how a teen wakes up on a school day vs. a day during summer. Teens usually use Vine to create and share silly videos of themselves and/or their friends and family.

What parents need to know

It's full of inappropriate videos. There's a lot of funny, clever expression on Vine, but much of it isn't appropriate for kids.

There are significant privacy concerns. The videos you post, the accounts you follow, and the comments you make on videos are all public by default. But you *can* adjust your settings to protect your posts; only followers will see them, and you have to approve new followers.

Parents can be star performers (without knowing). If your teens film you being goofy or silly, you may want to talk about whether they plan to share it.



7. **Kik Messenger** is an app-based alternative to standard texting that kids use for social networking. It's free to use but has lots of ads. It's fast and has no message limits, character limits, or fees if you just use the basic features, making it decidedly more fun in many ways than SMS texting.

What parents need to know

It's too easy to "copy all." Kik's ability to link to other Kik-enabled apps within itself is a way to drive "app adoption" (purchases) from its users for developers. The app also encourages new registrants to invite everyone in their phone's address book to join Kik, since users can only message those who also have the app.

There's some stranger danger. An app named *OinkText*, linked to Kik, allows communication with strangers who share their Kik usernames to find people to chat with. There's also a Kik community blog where users can submit photos of themselves and screenshots of messages (sometimes displaying users' full names) to contacts.

It uses real names. Teens' usernames identify them on Kik, so they shouldn't use their full real name as their username.



8. **Oovoo** is a free video, voice, and messaging app. Users can have group chats with up to 12 people for free. (The premium version removes ads from the service.) Teens mostly use Oovoo to hang out with friends. Many log on after school and keep it up while doing homework. Oovoo can be great for group studying and it makes it easy for kids to receive "face to face" homework help from classmates.

What parents need to know

You can only chat with approved friends. Users can only communicate with those on their approved "contact list," which can help ease parents' safety concerns.

It can be distracting. Because the service makes video chatting so affordable and accessible, it can also be addicting. A conversation with your kids about multitasking may be in order.

Kids still prefer in-person communication. Though apps like Oovoo make it easier than ever to video chat with friends, research shows that kids still value face-to-face conversations over online ones -- especially when it comes to sensitive topics. Still, they sometimes find it hard to log off when all of their friends are on.



9. **Ask.fm** is a social site that lets kids ask questions and answer those posted by other users -- sometimes anonymously. Although there are some friendly interactions on Ask.fm -- Q&As about favorite foods or crushes, for example, there are lots of mean comments and some creepy sexual posts. This iffy content is part of the site's appeal for teens.

What parents need to know

Bullying is a major concern. The news website MailOnline reported that the site has been linked to the suicides of several teens. Talk to your teens about cyberbullying and how anonymity can encourage mean behavior.

Anonymous answers are optional. Users can decide whether to allow anonymous posts and can remove their answers from streaming to decrease their profile's visibility. If your teens do use the site, they'd be best turning off anonymous answers and keeping themselves out of the live stream.

Q&As can appear on Facebook. Syncing with Facebook means that a much wider audience can see those Q&As.

The bottom line for all of these tools? If teens are using them respectfully, appropriately, and with a little parental guidance, they should be fine. Take inventory of your kid's apps and review the best practices.