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Snapchat

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Snapchat took the world by storm, capturing teens' attention like Facebook did in its infancy. And while its popularity remains high, adults everywhere are still scratching their heads as to why. Now with more features that increase its popularity and continue to be mimicked by other platforms, it's important that we parents understand how it works, why it's so popular, and how to have formative conversations about it with our teens.

— What is Snapchat?

A communication app that allows users to exchange pictures and videos that disappear after the amount of time prescribed by the sender OR after the receiver closes it, depending on settings chosen by the sender. Users can also exchange private chat messages that can be saved. Though pictures/videos disappear, they can be saved by the receiver via screenshot (the sender will be notified if this happens, but they cannot stop the receiver from doing so). Currently, phone calls can also be made.

— What's a Snapchat "Story"?

A set of photos or videos that [can be made public](#). The story is only viewable for 24 hours, but other users can view it an unlimited number of times during that window. (Recently, both [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) copied Snapchat by adding a story feature to their platforms.)

— What's the difference between "My Story" and "Our Story"?

When a user wants to put a video or a picture in their "story," they have the option to place it as "My Story" or "Our Story." My Story is specific to a user and allows every one of the user's friends to see the video or picture. Our Story is specific to an area, so it's essentially the collective story being told by all the users in one location. A user can post a video or picture to the area story (see Snap Maps below), which allows everyone in that area to see the video or picture.

— What's a "Snapstreak"?

[A record](#) of how many days in a row two users have Snapped (not chatted) each other. It's denoted by the fire emoji and a number, which indicates how long that streak has been going on. If an hourglass emoji appears next to the fire emoji, it means that the streak will expire unless both users Snap each other soon.

— What do emojis next to users' names mean?

The emojis mark how often a user interacts with other users, creating a hierarchy of friendship. It's a private feature, meaning a user's friends can't see who that user's "best friend" is. Here's [Snapchat's official explanation](#) of all the different emojis and what they mean.

— What's Snapcash?

Snapchat partnered with [Square](#) to give users a way to send each other money through the app. The terms of use require the user to be 18+ and have a credit/debit card or a checking account.

— What are Snap Maps?

[Interactive maps](#) that are automatically tagged with a location when a user uploads a picture. Basically, they share the current location of the user with whoever is approved to see the location.

To access them, the first time a user opens the Snap Map (by pinching/zooming out of the camera screen), they are prompted to share their location with Snapchat. After accepting the prompt, the user is then asked to set their privacy setting. There are three levels: All My Friends (which allows anyone on a user's friend list to see their location), Select Friends (which allows the user to decide which friends can see their location), and Ghost Mode (which means no one but the user can see their location). A user can select one level, then easily and quickly select another at any point. It should be noted that, after negative feedback, Snapchat made it so that the user's location only updates while Snapchat is open. Adding to your Story will also add a marker on the map until that Story expires.

There also is an explore feature where the user can click on any specific area in the world and see the stories specific to that area. For example, a person in Columbus, OH can choose to post a public story to that area and someone from Colorado Springs, CO can view it.

— Any other notable features?

The [Discover section](#) is a place where brands can post their own curated stories for users to view, as well as where [new original TV shows](#) made specifically for Snapchat are found. As is true for traditional media outlets, the content in this section is full of ideas, good and bad, but it's much harder to monitor what users are viewing. Also, one's "[Snap score](#)" is a measurement of how often one interacts with others on the app.

— What if I don't want my teen to see specific stories?

There are 2 screens that display stories from brands/celebrities: the "Stories" page and the "Discover" page.

Stories page: A user's friends' stories appear at the top of the page, underneath which are multiple rows of stories from brands. These rows are categorized as "Featured," "Shows," "Our Stories," and "Daily Stories." If a user decides he/she doesn't want to see a story listed under "Featured" or "Shows," he/she can simply tap and hold on that story until a dialogue box appears, then select "Hide Story." (One can also tap and hold, then select "Subscribe" to be notified when that brand posts new stories.) However, anything listed under "Our Stories" or "Daily Stories" cannot be hidden.

Discover page: Features stories from every brand, regardless of whether a user hid them on the "Stories" page or not. In addition, if a story appears that a user deems inappropriate, there is no way to "hide" any of them on this page. The only action one can take on this page is to subscribe to a brand's stories.

Clearly, Snapchat can't be modified enough to keep a user from viewing objectionable or age-inappropriate content. This may play into one's decision as to what age a child should be allowed to be on the platform, if at all.

However, we highly recommend that we parents approach the app and our children's desires to use it as an opportunity for conversation and discipleship, rather than simply writing it off as dangerous and inappropriate and telling our kids to never speak of it. Ultimately, our goal as parents should be to train our children to choose to walk away from content that hurts them or causes them to love God less (rather than making that decision for them). That is more easily accomplished by helping them see why content is harmful and allowing them to ask questions and be honest, not by issuing an executive order or saying "Because I said so." (See below.)

—— Why do my teens use it so often?!

Snapchat is very private, and largely the appeal is that whatever is sent doesn't have to be permanently out there for anyone to see ([although this is never actually the case](#)). In addition, the communication style is quick and easy, meaning you can visually share an experience with anyone anywhere with a push of a button, rather than spending time finding the perfect angle and filter before posting, as is the norm on Instagram these days. In addition, there is [pressure to be "cool" amongst friends](#) by having a high Snap score, so more interaction with the app equals a higher score, which sadly translates to higher social worth.

—— Who can see my child's Snaps?

As with Facebook, users must "add" one another on the app to be connected—meaning each user has control of who can see their snaps and who can chat with them. However, there are other [privacy settings](#) that can be changed to ensure that only certain people can send a user snaps or view their story.

—— What are the dangers?

Sexting has always been [the main concern](#). The app also comes with many picture filters that can completely alter someone's appearance, [for better or worse](#), meaning a user never has to show his/her real appearance. This isn't a new concept, but when it comes to issues of self-image and peer validation, it needs to be addressed. Keep in mind also the residual dangers of a user's choice of friends: Anyone who uses the app to sexually attract other people, slander someone else's name, or even simply post vulgar content can always have their privacy settings open, so that anyone—[friend or not](#)—can view their Story. [This dad](#) also warns that the app can be used by predators to groom and lure users into sex trafficking. Finally, the Discover section is full of ideas (often highly sexual) from brands that could be influencing your child. [Buzzfeed](#), [Comedy Central](#), [Cosmopolitan](#), and many other brands may be subversively teaching your child how to view the world.

—— Can I see who my child is friends with?

If you can't log directly into his/her account, no. A user's "best friends" used to be public, but in keeping with its roots, Snapchat made that information private [in 2015](#). The privacy/secretcy is part of the appeal of the app for younger generations.

— Is it bad to ask to be friends with my child?

There's something to be said for learning to speak your child's language and communicate with him/her in a way he/she understands. So for some kids, connecting with them on Snapchat could be the only way you can reach them or the way they prefer to communicate with you. However, younger generations are all about authenticity, so using the app without understanding its nuances and etiquette could actually bother your teens more than help you reach them. And being connected with your child on Snapchat doesn't mean you can see everything he/she does, so consider doing so carefully. If you're concerned about inappropriate behavior or relationships, a better approach might be temporarily revoking app privileges and having conversations with them about your concerns until trust is restored.

— Can I access my child's account? *Should I?*

By having the username and password, an account can be accessed via the app or [by computer](#) (with some difficulty, though; the platform is designed for mobile, so snapchat.com doesn't offer much in the way of account use and access). Be careful—even if you ask your child to remove his/her account, there are [many ways to hide it](#) on a phone. As for whether you should access your child's account, absolutely. Especially when dealing with minors, parents are directly responsible for their child's social media actions, whether they have prepared and monitored them or not. The decision to let a child access social media does not begin and end with the creation of an account. Our children need help understanding how their reputation, habits, and interactions all have great consequences.

— At what age should I let my child use it?

Each child's capacity to handle the responsibilities of online interaction grows differently, depending on their journey. A good place to start would be asking them questions like: "What are the main reasons you want a Snapchat?" "Would you be comfortable letting me view what you snap to other people?" or even "Can we be friends on Snapchat?" Open conversation is always a great first step in determining if your child is ready for social media. Allow your child the opportunity to slowly build trust and be responsible while still making it clear that there will be consequences for poor decisions. Ultimately, social media is an earned privilege, not a right.

— How do I talk with my kids about the app and its effects?

Conversations are one of the most powerful tools we parents have. Millennials and Gen Z don't simply accept an idea because it comes from an authority or because that's the way it's always been done. Rather, they want to understand the evidence or reasoning behind something before they commit or change their actions. Though this can come across as being bull-headed, stubborn, or confrontational, it's actually a very good thing! As parents, we simply need to take the time to help them analyze and understand how things like Snapchat are affecting them.

To get the conversations going, here are some topics to address and questions to ask:

- **General.** What do you like about Snapchat over other platforms? What do you not like about it? Would you want your son/daughter to be on it? Why or why not? Do you think it's safe? Do you ever feel unsafe on it?

- **Privacy.** Do we have a right to privacy? Why or why not? Does our age change how much privacy we should have? Does being under someone else's roof and authority change that? What's the difference between privacy and secrecy? What does God's Word say about both? Where does accountability come in?
- **Image.** How does Snapchat make you feel compared to Instagram? Is there more or less pressure to look a certain way? Why? How do the filters change the way you look at yourself? Do you think it matters if you conform to a certain way of looking in your posts? What happens if you don't?
- **Popularity.** Why do you think the app created Snapscores? Does it make you want to use the app more in order to increase your score? How do you feel when someone else you know has a higher score than you do? How do you feel when someone posts something at an event that you weren't invited to? Do you think it matters that one's worth or value can be tied to their Snapscore? Do you think it would affect you positively or negatively to be part of that?
- **Safety.** Do you know who can see your location if you add to your Snapmap or to an area's Story? Why do you think it could be dangerous? Has someone you don't know ever connected with you on the app? Do you know that sexual predators use the app to find and groom people for sex-trafficking? How would you spot someone who's doing that? What would you do if it happened to you?
- **Ideas.** Why do you think brands/celebrities spend so much time creating Shows and Stories that feel like a friend made them? Does it make you trust them more or less? Why do you think they use the images/videos they use? What do you think they are trying to accomplish by being on the app? What do you do if you come across something that is inappropriate? What do you define as "inappropriate"? Could a brand/person be teaching you something through their posts without you realizing it? Do you think that could have happened to you already? Are you ok with being influenced like that?
- **Bullying.** Is it possible to bully others through the app? How? Have you ever been bullied? Have you ever bullied? Do you think you've ever unintentionally hurt someone else's feeling through your Snaps? Is there a way to use the app that is more inclusive everyone?

— How do I delete the app or an account?

Here are instructions for [deleting an app](#) (Android and iOS), as well as instructions for [deleting the whole account](#). But please be aware! Simply deleting the app from your child's device or deleting his/her account doesn't mean that he/she won't find ways to access it later. Many parents have mentioned that their teens simply login from a friend's phone or give their friends their login info so that their friends can use their account and keep streaks going. Or they will simply use a friend's phone to create a new account, though they will lose their scores and streaks and have to start all over again, which could do more harm than good for their relationship with you. Having a conversation with them about why you think they're using it inappropriately or how it's harming them could be much more beneficial than simply reacting out of anger or fear and making them delete their account.

— My child is sexting! Now what?!

First, wait 24 hours to address the issue. It can be a shock to discover your child doing something inappropriate or that you never thought he/she would do, but taking the time to calm down, think rationally about the situation, and ask God for guidance is worth it. Once you've done that, you *must* address it by talking about it. See our [Parent's Guide to Sexting](#) for more help.

Final thoughts

Snapchat is a fun, powerful social media platform. As with any similar platform, there are many risks involved with allowing your child to be on it. But it's not inherently evil, and with the right guidance and wisdom from you, it can be a fun platform through which your child can connect with friends. Yet accountability is paramount in our tech-based world, and as the parent, you can establish good boundaries and practices that better protect your children. We highly encourage implementing a social media contract in your home, like [this one](#) or [this one](#). And for any boundaries you implement, help your children see that those boundaries are motivated by helping your children flourish and live the best life God has for them.

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