



PARENT GUIDE

Social Media

2026



Within the big universe that is social media, every site is its own unique world for teens.

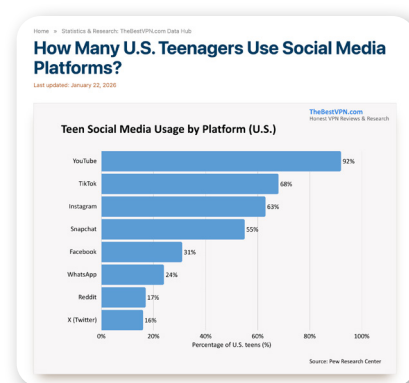
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Nearly **all** teenagers are on at least one social media platform. And even if adults use the same platforms teens do, the social media experiences they have are likely different. Understanding these differences can help parents have conversations and keep teens safe online.



We've put together some very basic information on the five platforms teens say they use most: Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube and Discord. These explainers are meant to help you understand the history, controversies, and red flags around each platform. This information is by no means comprehensive, but it does provide a lens into teen social media use—what they're looking for online, what they often come across, instead, and how to navigate the changing digital landscape.

This guide will answer the following questions:

- What are the potential dangers of the five most popular platforms?
- Why are some platforms more popular with young people?
- What are the parental controls for these apps?
- How can parents help their teens think about social media wisely?





Founded: 2010

Owner: Meta Platforms, Inc.

History: The platform was launched in 2010 by co-founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and is now owned by the parent company of Facebook, Meta Platforms, Inc. Instagram began with a focus on image sharing (with the option to add filters), and racked up one million users in its first three months on the app store. In the years since Meta purchased it, Instagram has added many new features, including short-form videos (known as Reels), live streaming (Instagram Live), and private messaging (DMs). **Today, Instagram remains one of the most popular social media platforms, with over 3 billion monthly active users.**

Who uses it?

According to the Pew Research Center's **2025 survey**, 63% of U.S. teenagers use Instagram, and 31% of them say they spend time on the app several times a day. Of those who use Instagram, 55% of teens report visiting the platform daily, with 12% using it almost constantly.

India, the United States, and Brazil have the most Instagram users.

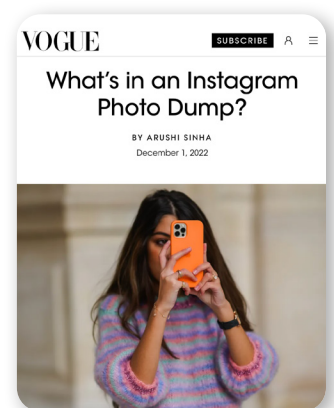
The user base skews younger, with 18-24 year-olds making up almost 30% of users. The gender split of young Instagram users in the U.S. is 66% girls.

Why do they want it?

Entertainment. Roughly nine-in-ten teens surveyed say that entertainment is a reason they use TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat.

Sharing. Teens use Instagram to keep up with friends and classmates, document their lives through **photo dumps**, and **discover** new brands and products.

Connection. Overall, teens want Instagram so they can see what their friends and classmates are sharing online. They may want to post consistently or prefer to keep a blank feed, as some teens do, just using the platform for messaging and viewing others' pages instead of curating their own.



Digital scrapbook. Along with a personal Instagram page, teens may run multiple accounts. A “finsta” (fake Insta) refers to a private, smaller Instagram page for friends only. Teens can also use these pages as a kind of digital scrapbook for friend groups and sports teams. These pages become a collection of inside jokes, memes, and photos of the group.

Search engine: Studies show that younger people opt to use Instagram and TikTok to find a place for lunch instead of an internet search engine.

What parents should know

A jury **found** that Meta was liable for the way in which its platforms endangered children and exposed them to sexually explicit material and contact with sexual predators.

An internal document circulated at Meta showed that teens who reported that Instagram regularly made them feel bad about their bodies saw significantly more “eating disorder adjacent content” than those who did not.

Videos sent via Instagram Direct Messaging can be set to disappear immediately after viewing. Users can receive direct messages from users whom they have not allowed to follow their private account, and there are methods to save copies of self-destructing, “disappearing” content

“Close Friends” on Instagram Stories is a feature that teens love. They can stay logged in to their main account while still sharing intimate information with a small group of friends. This information is invisible to users not on their selected “close friends” list—though screenshots can be taken.

Parental control options

Instagram requires users to be 13 years old to sign up for the platform—but there is no verification process beyond checking a box. In 2024, Instagram **said** it was working toward stricter age verification. The platform’s **community guidelines** prohibit nudity and hate speech. However, the platform either cannot keep up the volume of content or turns a blind eye to it, as nudity and hate speech regularly make it past its filter. Instagram’s direct messages are infamously lewd and riddled with scammers. .

Instagram’s **Teen Accounts** are automatically set with protective settings that include private-by-default accounts, which limit who can contact them and reduce users’ exposure to sensitive content. If a teen is under 16, a parent must approve changes to these automatic settings. These accounts offer a **supervision feature**, which allows parents to see who their teens are chatting with and what topics they are looking at on the app. Parents can also set daily time limits for app usage and block them from using it during specific time periods, like school hours.





Founded: 2016

Owner: TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC.

History: Chinese-based brand ByteDance paid **\$1 billion** to acquire a lip-syncing app called **Musical.ly** in 2017, merging it with their app, TikTok. Since then, TikTok has been a video-based app with a vertical-scrolling feed and a personalized “For You Page” full of recommendations. Videos are recommended based on TikTok’s proprietary algorithm—famously, the most accurate and addictive in the industry.

Who uses it?

Roughly one in five teens report being on TikTok “almost constantly.” Teen girls are more likely than teen boys to report this kind of use, according to **Pew Research**.

The majority of young adults and teens use TikTok, with about 63% saying they are on the platform.

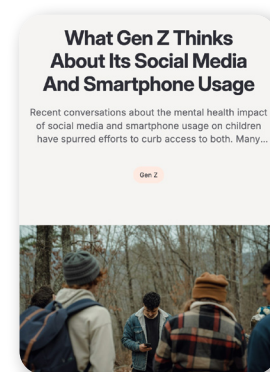
Why do they want it?

Entertainment. According to the **Pew Research**, “Entertainment is a particularly strong motivator for TikTok users. Roughly eight-in-ten of its users cite this as a major reason why they use the platform.”

Shopping. Since TikTok Shop launched in September 2023, it has grown to make up nearly 20% of social commerce.

Personalized content. TikTok is known for its remarkable hyper-personalization that curates individualized feeds based on user interests.

Social pressure. Nearly half of Gen Zers surveyed by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and the Harris Poll **reported** that they wished TikTok had never been invented. Many teens describe a love/hate relationship with the app, and it can sound like the way an addict describes their relationship to their addiction—they don’t love it, but they feel that they need it to survive.

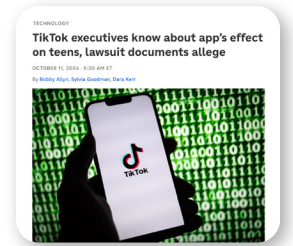


What parents should know:

Like all social media platforms, TikTok collects extensive user data, but for many years, this raised unique concerns because it was controlled by a foreign entity. After years of lawsuits and pressure from the U.S. government, TikTok's parent company is now a joint venture between American investors and ByteDance, but lingering concerns about how the company mines, stores, and uses consumer data remain.

TikTok's videos are addictive to watch. The 15 to 30-second clips give users a dopamine hit. Over time, this **may** shorten users' attention spans.

Suicide and self-harm videos can be missed by their monitors. **Internal TikTok reports** stated that "leakage" rates are high in extremely alarming categories, including: normalization of pedophilia, minor physical abuse, fetishization of minors, and glorification of minor sexual assault.



Parental control options

In April 2020, TikTok launched a feature called Family Pairing, which nonprofit ConnectSafely's CEO, Larry Magid, **described** as an opportunity for parents and teens to collaborate on developing healthy online habits.

To access Family Pairing, parents must have their own TikTok accounts. Plus, children must allow their parents to link their accounts, and can revoke their link at any time. While parents can use Family Pairing to filter content and see how much time their child is spending on TikTok, the ability for the teen to revoke their access may prevent some parents from being as restrictive as they'd like to be.

Family Pairing also allows parents and guardians to set time limits, view a dashboard (which shows how many times a teen has opened the app each day), and review their teens' content preferences.



Snapchat



Founded: 2011

Owner: Snap Inc.

History: Snapchat is a messaging app that has changed the way people communicate, particularly teenagers. It was the first platform of its kind to allow users to send photos and videos, known as “Snaps,” that disappear shortly after being viewed. In 2013, the app added a feature now popular to other social media apps, “Stories,” which allowed users to share photos and videos with friends for 24 hours. There’s also a “Discover” tab, which is full of content for users to browse from brands and influencers.

Who uses it?

Snapchat is primarily used by young adults, with 51.1% of Snapchat’s monthly active user base being Gen Z—more than any other social media platform.

Why do they want it?

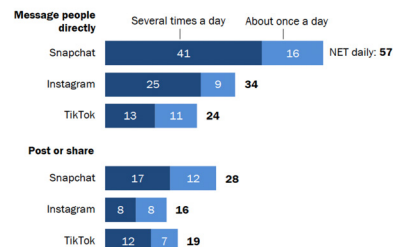
Impermanence. Teens on Snapchat message others and post there at **higher rates** than on other platforms: 57% say they message people daily on the app. Whatever you post on the internet is there forever, and young people know that. That’s why they would rather post where posts disappear after 24 hours or after a few seconds. If a screenshot is taken, users are notified.

Connection. Snapchat **users** are the most likely to say keeping up with friends and family is a major reason they use the platform.

Ease. SnapChat’s communication style is quick and easy, meaning you can visually share an experience with someone with a push of a button, rather than spending time finding the perfect angle for a photo, whereas in a texting conversation you have to be relatively engaged and think of clever responses, with Snapchat, often a simple picture of your forehead will suffice (this is especially true within the context of “talking” or dating).

Teen Snapchat users message and post more often than those on Instagram and TikTok

% of each platform’s U.S. teen users who say that overall, they do the following on it ...



Note: Teens refers to those ages 13 to 17. Figures may not add up to NET value due to rounding. Those who did not answer or gave other responses are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted Sept. 25-Oct. 9, 2025.
Teens' Experiences on TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat

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What parents should know:

“**Snap Maps**” shares the current location of a user with whoever they have approved to see their location, which creates safety risks.

Snapchat’s privacy makes it easy for teens to send sexually explicit content to other users without anyone knowing, as well as encounter sexual content in the Discover section.

Teens can screenshot or save snaps, so what might have been intended to be a private message can quickly be used as ammunition for bullying.

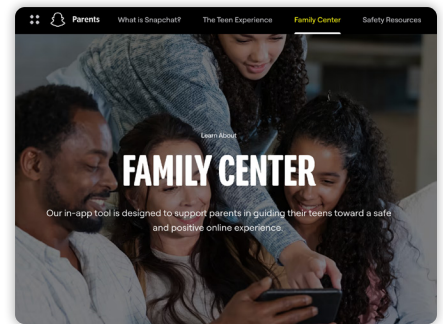
The app also comes with many picture filters that can completely alter someone’s appearance, for better or worse, meaning a user never has to show his/her real appearance.

My AI, a chatbot feature automatically added to every user’s main screen, is customizable. Users can change the chatbot’s name, design a custom avatar for it, and bring the chatbot into conversations with friends. This blurs the line between friends and machines, according to **some parents**.

Parental control options:

Family Center gives parents insight into who their teen is chatting with and friends with on the app, as well as getting insights into screen time.

Parents can also **see** friends that have been added recently and whether or not their teen has location sharing enabled.





Founded: 2005

Owner: Alphabet (Google’s parent company)

History: What began as a platform to share home videos over twenty years ago has remained **one of** the most popular social media websites of all time. Founders Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim, who were former PayPal employees, sold the platform for \$1.65 billion in stock in 2006 to Google, according to **Britannica**.

Who uses it?

YouTube is not only widely used, but it’s also the platform that most teens visit on a daily basis. Roughly three-quarters of teens say they use it every day, according to **Pew Research**.

Boys are slightly **more likely** than girls to use YouTube (94% vs. 89%).

About one in five teens **reports** using YouTube and TikTok “almost constantly.”

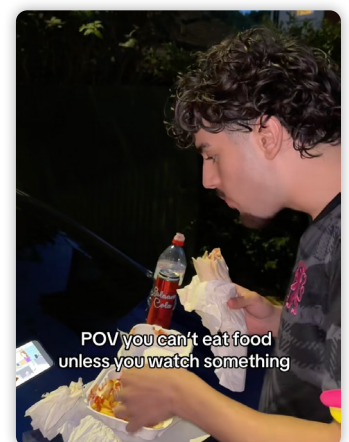
YouTube is the **only** platform that older and younger teens are equally likely to use.

Why do they want it?

Entertainment. YouTube is the perfect video platform for teens. It has longer videos than TikTok, but shorter ones than a TV show episode or a movie. There’s **a joke online** about how young people can not eat a meal alone without watching a YouTube video, which may give you a glimpse into how dependent teens feel on the app.

Search engine. Teens use YouTube as a search engine. Whether they are looking for entertainment, tutorials, or inspiration, YouTube has it.

Fandom. Influencers often create their longer-form content on YouTube, like 30 to 40-minute vlogs. Fans will flock to their YouTube pages to engage more with their favorite creators, cultivating a one-sided, “parasocial” relationship.



What parents should know:

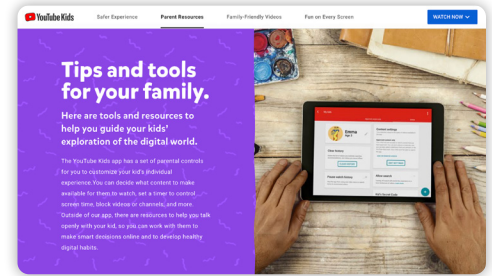
YouTube’s recommendation system **can** pull teens toward extreme material. Once a teen shows interest in one topic, the algorithm will show them increasingly intense or polarizing videos to keep them on the platform.

YouTube uses machine learning to review video content before it gets posted. That means that explicit content can slip through the cracks and get recommended to a teen—whether they were looking for it or not.

Parental control options:

To create any YouTube account, you need to be 13 years or older, but there is no verification process beyond checking a box.

YouTube Kids is a platform for those under 13 who desire to watch kid-related content. YouTube Kids hosts **parental controls** that allow parents to create accounts for their kids, monitor the videos that kids are watching, and even handpick the allowed videos themselves.





Founded: 2015

Owner: Jason Citron and Stanislav Vishnevskiy

History: Discord started as a gaming-focused chat app for desktop and mobile devices. It was launched by friends Jason Citron and Stanislav Vishnevskiy, who were designing a video game together but could not find a reliable way to talk while playing online. During the pandemic, the platform went from 56 million users to 150 million. By 2023, 28% of teens said they have used the platform, according to **Pew**. Communication happens in private or virtual communities called “servers,” and can include voice calls, video calls, and text messages.

Who uses it?

Users connect on Discord to game, but also do homework together, sing karaoke, or just hang out. Hosting a **movie night** on Discord is a popular way for long-distance friends to connect.

Why do they want it?

Connection. Discord offers an easy way for teens to connect over shared interests.

Romance. Some people meet their significant other on Discord servers. Discord even posted a TikTok about this, “**signs you are in a dischordship**,” showing different ways people show their romantic interest on the platform.

No ads. Discord is unique in the fact that it does not have traditional ads. Instead, it has “Quests,” which are basically promoted ads that encourage users to play games. They can either play a game for a certain amount of time (a “Play Quest”) or watch a short video (a “Video Quest”). By doing these things, they get in-game currency, which they can use for profile effects like exclusive avatar decorations.

What parents should know:

Explicit content: Teens can **easily access** inappropriate content on Discord. There are channels labeled NSFW (not safe or suitable for work) with inappropriate or 18+ content, but there is no gating beyond confirming your age with a check mark to access them.

Predators: Teens can be approached by strangers in private messages or group chats, including **adults pretending to be teenagers**.

Parental control options:

Users must be 13 or over to create an account. Discord verifies this by having users enter their birthdate, which can be easily fabricated.

Family Center helps parents see how their teens spend their time on Discord.

Discord **says** it is focused on rolling out more safety features worldwide to “ensure age-appropriate experiences for everyone.” But the timeline for these new features is unclear.

