

axis

Social Media Toolkit



"Attention is the main prize of the internet. Everyone is fighting for it, and the phone is the prime battleground. The most potent of weapons in this war is the incessant, whining notification trying to pull your attention away from whatever you are actually doing and into some other app."

— Zach Hines, "[Death by push notification](#)"

A Parent's Guide to **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Table of Contents

From farming to Facebook	4
Do the experts think social media is good or bad?	5
What's different about how Gen Z uses it?	6
So is it neutral? Does it depend only on how a person uses it?	8
What's good about social media?	10
What's bad about it?	11
How else does it shape us?	13
So when should I let my kids get it?	14
Can I keep my kids from being exposed to it through their friends?	15
Hope in the time of Instagram.....	16
Invitation to Generosity.....	17
Sources Used in This Parent Guide	17

This guide will help you discuss:

- ✓ How social media affects us
- ✓ Why social media is so appealing
- ✓ How teens can use social media in a healthy way
- ✓ Whether social media is good or bad

From farming to Facebook

For basically all of time, parents have taught children how to do things properly—things like building fires, saddling horses, baking bread, plowing fields, or, more recently, making phone calls, answering the door, and driving cars. But over the last few decades, this natural order has been upended, thanks to our immense technological advancements. Now, it's the children who show parents how to send text messages, post on Facebook, use Snapchat filters, and make TikTok videos. As technology continues to advance rapidly, children adapt and learn while parents struggle to keep up.

This guide will hopefully help put parents back in the driver's seat because children still need guidance, wisdom, and, yes, sometimes even boundaries to keep them healthy and safe on social media as they learn and grow. Though trying to write a Parent's Guide to Social Media is, as one Axis employee put it, like trying to write a Parent's Guide to the Entire Internet, we hope to offer a big-picture perspective, conversation starters, and ways to train the next generation to make wise decisions. It's easy to try to be the Holy Spirit for our kids, especially if we've already seen them make poor decisions, but it's better in the long run to do the hard work of training them properly so that they can flourish and thrive the entire time they inhabit our social-media-saturated world.

Do the experts think social media is good or bad?

Would it surprise you to hear that many of the [top technologists in Silicon Valley](#) see screen time as a negative thing and put severe limits on their own kids' screen time? One of their chief concerns is the addictive nature of devices like the smartphone.

Psychologist and researcher Jean M. Twenge studies differences between generations. [In an article](#) on what characterizes today's teens, she says she has found that screen time is connected to increased unhappiness. There's even [research showing excessive social media](#) use "is also starting to affect peoples' decision making abilities and make them more likely to engage in 'risky behaviors'".

We're sure you're aware that almost everyone these days has a smartphone and that parents are giving them to young children. The average age now for kids to receive a smartphone is [11-12 years old](#). [Pew Research reports](#) that "fully 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 46% say they are online 'almost constantly.'"

The reason why all this matters is because much of teens' screen time [is spent on social media](#), with [36% believing](#) they spend too much time on it.

Reflection: How do you use social media? Do you think it is a positive or negative force in your life?

What's different about how Gen Z uses it?

As you might expect, Gen Z (b. late 1990s to early 2010s) consumes more online content than any other generation. They prefer visual over text-based content, as you can see from the fact that their current top [three favorite apps](#) are YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram.

[One Gen Zer says](#), “Not only are new generations more savvy when it comes to social media, but we tend to express ourselves differently depending on which account we are using, tailoring content to fit the image we want to portray on that account.”

According to this [article](#), Gen Z primarily sees their social media outlets as a way to connect and create community. More practically, though, Gen Z tends to use social media [as a way to entertain themselves](#), as well as to be educated (i.e. [by watching YouTube videos](#)). The kids of Gen Z also [like online anonymity](#). They're more likely to create multiple accounts and profiles on a platform and more likely to direct message people instead of publicly tag them.

A plurality of teens (55%) think that social media [doesn't impact them either positively or negatively](#). Some reasons why teens believe social media use is positive are:

- ⦿ It helps them communicate with friends and family members.
- ⦿ It allows them to meet new people.
- ⦿ It can connect them with people who have the same interests.
- ⦿ It allows them to express their emotions and share unique experiences.
- ⦿ They can find and get support from communities with similar experiences.
- ⦿ It helps them feel less lonely.
- ⦿ It gives them greater access to information and news.
- ⦿ It helps them learn new things.
- ⦿ It helps them feel more comfortable asking for help.
- ⦿ It's entertaining.

Reasons teens mentioned for seeing social media as negative are:

- ⤵ It's easier to spread hate to a large audience.
- ⤵ Anonymity makes people more comfortable with being cruel.
- ⤵ People hurt each other because of what they see on social media.
- ⤵ It gives a false picture of others' lives.
- ⤵ It causes people to neglect real-life relationships.
- ⤵ It distracts people from important tasks like doing homework.
- ⤵ It causes them to succumb to peer pressure.
- ⤵ It can lead to "psychological issues or drama."

Really, teens are quite perceptive when it comes to what they see as positive and negative, though some may be a bit naive about just how much of an impact it has on them. In addition, it's important to remember that motives matter a great deal when considering if social media is good or bad for a person.

Reflection: How do the teens in your life use social media? How do they use it positively? Negatively?

So is it neutral? Does it depend only on how a person uses it?

Actually, we don't think social media is neutral. You've heard the expression, "There's no such thing as a free lunch," right? As [Geoffrey A. Fowler of The Washington Post says](#), any time we don't *pay* for a product, we *are* the product. [Every social media company](#) makes money through the user—by buying and selling the information we give them.

It's important for us and our kids to recognize that social media companies are just that: companies. They have to make money to continue to exist, which means that each of them has an agenda. And those agendas, whether we're aware of them or not, shape our online experience and influence our values.

Tristan Harris of the Center for Humane Technology used to be a design ethicist at Google. There, he studied how to guide the decisions of billions of people on social media. In his TED talk, "[How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day](#)," he explains that social media platforms are based on a consumerist model, one that's designed to get us to stay on them for as long as possible. As a result, these companies create problems and then solve them for us.

YouTube's autoplay feature is one good example. As soon as you're done watching a video on YouTube, another immediately starts playing, capturing your attention and keeping you on the site. And who chooses the video? An algorithm created by YouTube. Yes, it's based on what you just watched, but it's still YouTube that chooses. By limiting our options and playing to our desire to consume, social media companies are guiding our decisions.

Harris also mentions Snapchat, one of the main platforms teens prefer for communicating with each other. Of its Snapstreaks feature, Harris says:

[It] shows the number of days in a row that two people have communicated with each other. In other words, what they just did is they gave two people something they don't want to lose. Because if you're a teenager, and you have 150 days in a row, you don't want that to go away.

Teens will actually give their passwords to their friends when they go on vacation so that their friends can keep their streaks going while they're gone. Sound like addictive behavior to you? In "[How Technology is Hijacking Your Mind— from a Magician and Google Design Ethicist](#)," Harris says:

If you want to maximize addictiveness, all tech designers need to do is link a user's action (like pulling a lever) with a variable reward. You pull a lever and immediately receive either an enticing reward (a match, a prize!) or nothing. Addictiveness is maximized when the rate of reward is most variable.

Believe it or not, we're not saying all this to be alarmist. We're not saying that we should see social media as evil and never use it again. But we do think it's important to be aware of how it's designed and how it's affecting us. We suggest making learning about a platform's goals and agendas a prerequisite for your teens joining that platform.

Reflection: In what ways do you misuse social media? How can you take steps to be more healthy in your use of it?

What's good about social media?

If we want to disciple our kids and train them to use social media well, we need to start by acknowledging what's good about it. After all, there are reasons why [billions of people are on](#) at least one social media platform. So if we only ever demonize it, two things will happen: 1. We'll alienate them; and 2. We'll fail to prepare them to thrive in—let alone bring restoration to—today's world.

Connection and Communication. We agree with the teens above who said that social media can allow for greater connection with people. When in history has a person been able to communicate with someone across the world in a few seconds? However, as with all good things, if this type of communication is used poorly (DMing instead of having a face-to-face disagreement, for example), then its benefits diminish.

Education. Indeed, YouTube is a great place to find educational content, assuming that viewers know how to be discerning about what they consume *and* that companies aren't censoring or tailoring what they show to viewers.

Access. Social media provides greater access not just to content, but also to people from diverse experiences and backgrounds. In general, social media allows us to find out more about what's going on in the world, whether that's news or what's happening in other people's lives.

Voice. Many people who would otherwise have no way of being heard (or who might be ignored by mainstream media) have built up large followings on social media, which has allowed them to share their message in unprecedented ways.

Encouragement and Humor. Many platforms make it easy to find uplifting communities and humor, which has in turn helped people deal with their struggles, circumstances, fears, mental health, and more.

As we'll see in the next sections, despite the good things social media offers, they are still limited, and many of its positive aspects can become negative very quickly.

Reflection: What other positive aspects of social media can you think of?

What's bad about it?

As much good as social media has done, it will always come with drawbacks that restrict or even negate its positive effects. Why? Because it's a tool, and all tools have their limitations.

It was originally created to provide human connection—a noble goal—but it will never be able to approach the depth and richness of face-to-face interactions. Text and images, memes and emojis are all fun, but they can only express so much. Online, we often lose the tone and context for conversations, even when watching videos. So beyond talking about the negatives listed below, it's important to talk about how to use the tool to enhance, rather than detract from, our relationships.

Anonymity, hatred, and cruelty. Because of the anonymity (perceived or actual) social media provides, people feel much more free to be hateful and cruel to each other. “I’m never going to meet this person, so what does it matter if I say terrible things?” Just last year a [14-year old girl named Molly Russell](#) committed suicide after being inspired to do so by several Instagram accounts portraying graphic content related to suicide and self-harm.

Distraction. The tendency to be distracted by social media is something almost all of us have experienced. [MIT Professor Sherry Turkle says](#), “Young people tell me it would be nice to have the attention of their friends at meals but that this has become an unrealistic expectation. Social norms work against it.”

Escape. It's easy for us to rely on our phones for “protection.” Uncomfortable talking to the person sitting across from you? Don't want to make awkward small talk? Your smartphone is an easy escape. It's more difficult to have a face-to-face conversation than it is to go online and craft our responses to someone who isn't right in front of us.

Comparison and Validation. The more we use social media, the more likely we are to begin putting too much stock in what other people do there. Then our self-worth depends on how we think our lives measure up to what we see of other people's lives. We feel bad if we don't get “enough” attention in the form of comments, shares, or likes. People sometimes joke that if something isn't on social media, it didn't happen. While this is a joke, many of us actually feel like we need social media to validate our lives.

Expectations and Information. Social media can increase our expectation for instant gratification. Because we *can* be connected all the time, we expect other people to respond or react to us

immediately. And we feel like we have to respond to other people immediately. Because of this ability to respond so quickly, we might feel as though situations that are not that big of a deal are actually emergencies.

Greater access to information can be good, but it also makes it harder to sort through what information is actually valuable and reliable. And while having and creating supportive communities can be wonderful, it can also be dangerous. We might turn to these communities to justify behavior we shouldn't. Greater information also increases our FOMO (fear of missing out) because we know more about what we cannot experience.

Time. The sheer amount of time we spend on social media is important. We might not be doing anything bad on it, but what are we *not* accomplishing or what good are we neglecting through letting it consume so much of our energy? What relationships, skills, or experiences are we missing out on because we're spending our time in a digital world?

Boundaries. Something the teens in the survey didn't mention was the lack of boundaries online, whether we're talking about sharing too much or how easy it is to connect with strangers. Also, the ease with which sexual content finds people should be among parents' top concerns.

These are all issues we need to be aware of, but not so that we live in fear or put our kids on lockdown in the name of protecting them. Rather, we think a healthy approach is to teach our children how to use social media well and to have lots of conversations with them about it as they use it. That way, instead of running away from social media or carelessly embracing it, our kids can have wisdom and love in how they conduct themselves online.

Reflection: How can you model a healthy relationship with social media for your teens?

How else does it shape us?

We might feel like we should be able to express ourselves, even if we aren't credible authorities on an issue. We love to share our opinions online. Often we are just talking to express what we think, instead of to share and learn worthwhile ideas.

We might share too much in the name of being authentic. Authenticity is good, but people often feel comfortable sharing very personal issues on social media. This is likely related to the "anonymity" social media provides. When there's not a group of people actually there with us, it seems safe and even normal to share more than we ought.

We might feel like we're doing something meaningful just by posting. There's a term for this: "slacktivism." Slacktivism is when people do something that seems meaningful, but which doesn't require much sacrifice and mainly is for the purpose of making them feel better. An example would be when people put a filter on their profile pictures that supports a certain cause. This only requires a few clicks, but it's easy to feel like we've done something incredibly noble by doing so.

We might let it influence how we live, potentially making life-altering decisions. At different times, various trends sweep the internet, and people make decisions because of them.

Reflection: What parts of your online life can you take into real life instead?

So when should I let my kids get it?

Family Zone [recommends](#) that parents not let their kids get social media until they're out of middle school. The first reason for this is legal. The minimum age for getting on most social media platforms is 13. If parents let their kids get on before age 13, they're teaching their kids to lie. The parents are also removing their kids from the protection of laws that keep companies from gathering the kids' information.

We also mentioned that technology and social media have the potential to be addictive. Again, this language is not extreme, but is something that the technologies' creators recognize themselves. It should go without saying that it's unwise to expose children, who are still developing, to experiences that could be addictive. On top of this, we've noted that social media presents a skewed version of reality and that people have a tendency to try to find their self-worth there. If adults are struggling with these behaviors, it's probably not wise to expose young children, who are even more vulnerable, to those behaviors without training them first.

Beyond that, consider your kids and their maturity on a case-by-case basis. [Protect Young Eyes suggests](#) some areas of maturity parents should evaluate before letting their kids get on social media:

- ⦿ How well they currently follow your rules/how well you can trust them.
- ⦿ What their friendships are like—do they have good social skills or serious problems in their friendships (which could get worse if they start carrying them out online)?
- ⦿ Whether they have inner strength.
- ⦿ If you've talked to them about porn, sexting, online predators, cyberbullying, etc.

This last one is non-negotiable. The risk is too great for you to let your kids online without talking to them about porn, predators, and sexting. In fact, because of how often our culture is talking about sex and the ease with which porn finds children, we think your conversations on those topics should start *much* earlier than age 13. See our [Parent's Guide to the Sex Talk](#), [Parent's Guide to Difficult Conversations](#), and [Parent's Guide to Pornography](#) for more info.

Again, training is key! You'd never let your kids drive a car without teaching them how first. In the same way that you prepare your kids to drive a car, teach them to use social media *before* they get on it. First and foremost, encourage them to build relationships in person. Second, start them off with a family account on a device that's not a phone. Follow their accounts, and set time limits for them. Also check out the [Protect Young Eyes article](#) on the best phones for kids.

Reflection: In what ways is your child growing up in a different world from the one you grew up in?

Can I keep my kids from being exposed to it through their friends?

You should never assume that you're totally keeping your kids from being exposed to anything. That's why building strong relationships with them, having conversations about difficult topics, creating a culture of vulnerability and grace, and praying for them consistently are crucial. You will never be able to control everything that happens to them, even when they are very young. Nevertheless, there are [steps you can take](#) to try to keep your kids away from social media when they're playing with other children whose parents allow their kids to be on social media.

Otherwise, here are a few ideas to help your kids develop a healthy relationship with social media:

- ④ Learn what they enjoy about social media and why.
- ④ Educate yourself on the apps they're using.
- ④ Avoid using technology to babysit your kids.
- ④ Set an example of healthy social media use.
- ④ Make a social media "contract" or set of family rules that you all follow. These rules could include no devices in bedrooms at night and that all devices need to be charged together in a public area.
- ④ Teach them what information is and isn't appropriate to share online.
- ④ Teach them how to find and verify good information and how to recognize bad information.
- ④ Emphasize how to use social media for good, instead of dwelling on how it's bad.
- ④ Prepare your kids for what to do if someone online flatters them, approaches them inappropriately, or threatens them.
- ④ Help them to be self-aware about why they're on social media and to manage their expectations when people act in a way they don't like.
- ④ Help them to build real-life friendships.
- ④ Teach them a biblical understanding of FOMO.
- ④ Encourage them to think about others before themselves. They're not responsible for how other people react, but it's thoughtful to consider if a post will make someone else feel bad, even if it's just a post about an enjoyable time your kids had.

- 👉 Teach them to be ok with quiet and stillness apart from their devices.
- 👉 Challenge them not to use their phones to protect themselves, but to be brave enough to try to have a conversation, even if no one else seems interested.

Reflection: How can you start conversations with your teens around the subject of social media in a way that is loving and empathetic?

Hope in the time of Instagram

Social media is part of our culture for the foreseeable future. It would be easy to decide that it's either all good or all bad, but it's simply more complicated than that. In fact, we've barely scratched the surface of everything we could talk about.

So we'll end by emphasizing again that even if you feel like you're barely keeping up, your kids still need your wisdom and guidance. Whether your kids have been on social media for years or they're just starting to ask about it, it's never too late or too early to start "Social Media Ed." We hope and pray that, as you have these conversations, you'll be able to teach your kids how to honor God in *everything* they do—including how they use social media—and how to truly flourish and thrive in our modern world.

Reflection: What are some ways you can invite Jesus into your relationship with social media?

Invitation to Generosity

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org. Thank you!

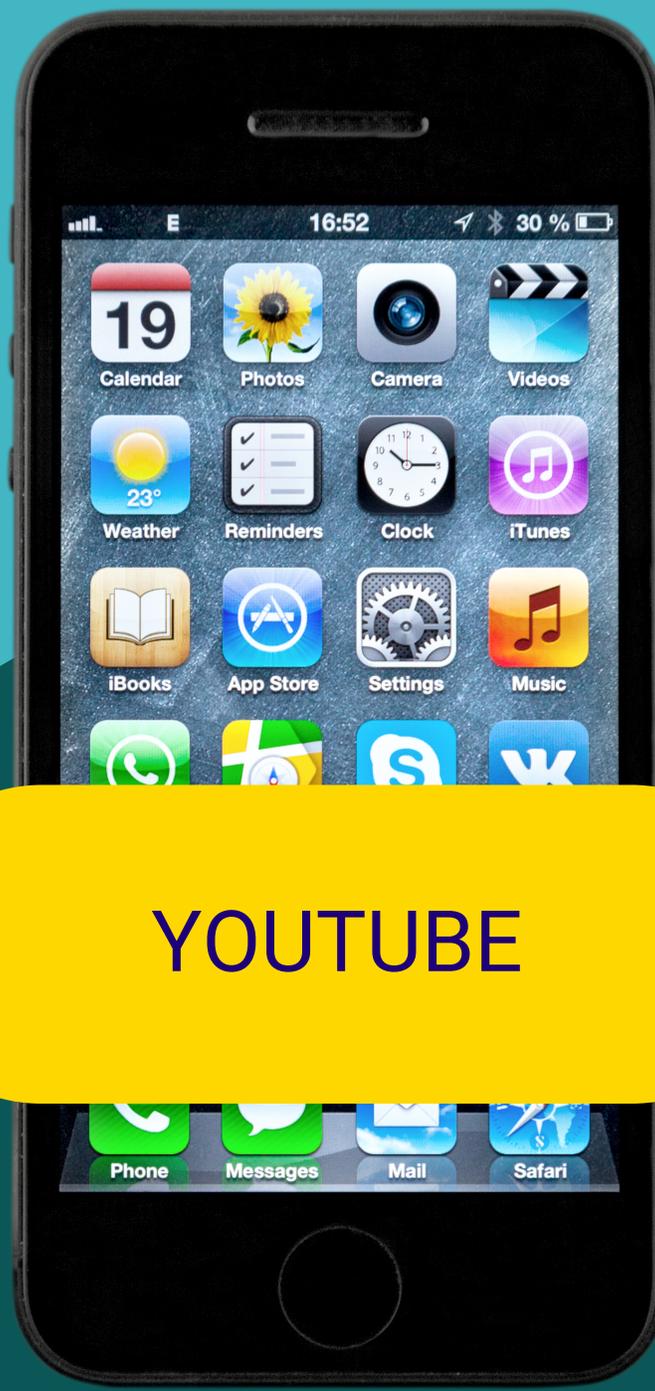
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Social Media Toolkit



YOUTUBE

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*YouTube is the
new TV.*

—John Lynch, [*Business Insider*](#)

It's Not Just for Watching Silly Videos Now and Then. Gen Z "Can't Live Without" YouTube.

Ever heard of "[Charlie bit my finger](#)"? The [double rainbow all the way](#)? What about the outrage that occurred when Logan Paul posted a video of his reaction to someone who had [just committed suicide](#) (*strong language*)?

These are all what we might call "cultural events" that occurred on [YouTube](#), a social video sharing platform. At 1.5 billion, the [number of YouTube users](#) is not too far behind those on Facebook (2 billion), and [YouTube receives](#) more than 30 million visitors per day. Or for another way of looking at it, people around the globe are collectively watching [a billion hours of content on YouTube each day](#).

The days when you used to wait till Saturday night to watch your favorite show are long gone. This might be old news to you—after all, Netflix has grown pretty popular. But when asked which online service they couldn't "live without," [67% of users aged 13-24](#) named YouTube, with 85% saying it was something they regularly watch. YouTube easily surpassed Netflix, traditional TV, and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. So what's the appeal? What are they watching that they can't live without? What are all the different subscriptions now associated with it? How do we talk to them about it all? And most importantly, how do we teach our children to set healthy boundaries around all of their media usage, including YouTube?

—— **What is YouTube?**

Simply put, YouTube is a social media platform for sharing videos with people. Users can limit themselves to watching, liking, and commenting on other people's videos, or they can create their own channels and post their own. Former PayPal employees Jawed Karim, Steve Chen, and Chad Hurley [created YouTube in 2005](#). [This infographic](#) has some of the major highlights of YouTube's history up through 2012. Now a multibillion dollar company owned by Google, people use YouTube for just about anything you could imagine and for many purposes you never would. It's almost difficult to conceive of the internet without it.

—— **What can you watch on YouTube?**

The answer is so broad, it's rather difficult to answer. You can see your favorite movie clip, find out why everyone was talking about [Fergie's rendition of the National Anthem](#), or watch some guy named PewDiePie freak out while he plays video games. You can watch celebrities compete with Jimmy Fallon, discover how to fix something around your house, or giggle at adorable animals. Whether it's music videos, interviews with your favorite athletes, or news updates, you can find almost anything you want to see on YouTube.

YouTube is unique in: 1. its breadth and variety of content; and 2. how it has democratized who can gain fame and influence. One friend of ours believes that YouTube is the "most underrated influential platform of the day." A case in point is the popular TV series, *This Is Us*, whose Season 2 premiere in the fall of 2017 [drew 12.6 million viewers](#). If you look at [how many views YouTube star Logan Paul has been getting per day](#) (anywhere from around 2-12 million),

he is arguably far more influential. (YouTube stars are whole other conversation in and of themselves. We'll save that for a subsequent Guide.)

———— **How does it work?**

If you feel completely out of your depth when it comes to YouTube, [this resource from GCFLearnFree](#) gives a comprehensive, although slightly dated, explanation of what it is and what parents need to know.

Watching videos on YouTube is pretty straightforward. You simply go to the website, search for what you want to find, and click on whichever videos you want to view. When watching videos, you can expect to encounter ads and/or annotations, which are essentially pop-ups that people can add at various points in their videos. Whenever a YouTube video ends, another will start playing automatically. If you click “Cancel” to stop the next video from autoplaying, you'll see a grid of related videos you might be interested in watching next.

Anyone can watch videos on YouTube, but you have to sign in with your Google account if you want to comment on, like, or share them. Signing in also allows you to post your own videos.

You can also create playlists of your favorite videos, as well as subscribe to other users' YouTube channels. In addition to your desktop computer, YouTube can be accessed through the mobile app or through your smart TV.

———— **What's YouTube Red?**

[YouTube Red](#) is a subscription YouTube is offering in a few select countries, including the U.S. Basically, users can watch ad-free videos, as well as original TV shows with YouTube stars, even when not connected the internet. The subscription also includes access to Google Play Music and the ability to listen to videos with one's screen turned off. It starts at \$9.99/month, after a one-month free trial.

There's some confusion over [what YouTube Red is supposed to be](#): a platform similar to Netflix or Hulu, or one more like Spotify? While not pulling in large amounts of revenue at the moment, YouTube Red will soon be available to 100+ more countries than it currently is, so perhaps that broader availability will increase its popularity. Either way, for Gen Z, if their favorite YouTube stars are in a YouTube Red show, they will want a subscription.

———— **What's YouTube TV?**

An alternative to cable television (billing itself “cable-free live TV”), [YouTube TV](#) offers many of the shows and networks previously only available through traditional cable or satellite subscriptions (as well as all YouTube Red original shows and, [more recently, sports](#)). It costs \$40/month and is now available on various [smart TV devices](#), in addition to portable and handheld ones. It also offers the ability to record shows to a cloud-based DVR that has no storage limits.

Since its launch in 2017, YouTube TV has expanded to include more networks, providing the majority of Americans with access to local and cable networks on their devices. As it has

already been doing with its main platform, [YouTube is continuing to reinvent](#) “the television experience for the new generation.”

—— **What's YouTube Kids?**

As you might guess, YouTube developed [YouTube Kids](#) (YT Kids) for the purpose of giving kids a safer YouTube experience, since people can post whatever they want on YouTube (until they get reported or flagged). And because millions of people are on YouTube, it's not difficult to run across something inappropriate.

YT Kids purports to be a “world of learning and fun, made just for kids” and a “safer online experience.” The app does have a lot of [kid-friendly content on it](#): There are kids' shows like *Winnie the Pooh*, kids' songs, and educational material. Parents can create a profile with videos tailored for their kids and even set a time limit on how long their kids can be on the app. YT Kids has parental controls that enable parents to prevent their children from searching for videos on their own. **However, there is no way to block content in advance of encountering it. You have to block inappropriate videos as they come up.**

And inappropriate videos do come up on YT Kids. Certain people in the world like to create content that seems kid-friendly so that YouTube's algorithm doesn't flag it as inappropriate, then turns out to be disturbing. On the YT Kids homepage, YouTube even admits that “no system is perfect” and that videos do make it through that are not appropriate. CommonSense Media strongly recommends that you do not allow your children to search for videos on their own on YouTube Kids. They also recommend close supervision and that you watch videos with your kids as much as possible if you choose to let them use the app. We briefly looked into the app and noted that one of the shows featured heroines that were pretty sexualized.

It's been several months since YouTube came under criticism for inappropriate videos on YT Kids. But disturbing content [is still appearing there](#), with YouTube admitting that it needs to “do more.” If you'd rather go with a service that has tighter parental controls and closer oversight, check out the [apps listed here](#).

—— **Why do kids (and young adults) like YouTube?**

As a parent, it's easy to feel as though YouTube is just another app for you to worry about. It might seem like the only purpose of the platform is for your kids to waste time watching pointless videos. So what's good about it, and why do teenagers like it so much?

It's Easy to Consume, Educational, and Entertaining

One reason younger people like YouTube is that it's easy to consume. It only takes a few seconds to access, it's visual, and the videos don't require a huge time commitment since they are often only a few minutes long.

In addition, because the videos on it are free to watch (thanks, ads!...), it's given us much easier access to a wide range of educational content, much of which is excellent.

As we've already said, YouTube is a new form of entertainment. It's one of the main ways modern young people like to relax and unwind. See Common Sense Media's video “[What Kids Are Watching on YouTube](#)” to get a general idea of some of the most popular types of videos that teens enjoy watching. If you enjoy watching a show or a sports game on TV to relax,

that's really not that different from how kids are using YouTube. They're just using a different platform and format.

It's On Demand

Unlike broadcast TV, YouTube videos are always there, available to watch whenever a person wants to watch. Because one isn't required to be available at a prescribed time to view content, it offers a certain amount of control: I can watch what and when I want to and for as long as I want. This kind of control was unprecedented before YouTube, though platforms like Netflix and Amazon Video (and to a lesser extent Hulu) now offer similar control, though YouTube still has the edge in terms of sheer hours of content available and of types of content.

It's Cultural Aggregation

One of the biggest appeals of YouTube is that it's one of the main places where culture is "happening." If you want to know the latest news in pop culture and society at large, there are plenty of YouTubers who will collect the highlights and give commentary on them.

The biggest current cultural moments of our society, even if they don't originally air on YouTube, will make it there. These include presidential speeches, Super Bowl interviews, Olympic triumphs, and genuinely heroic moments, such as when pilot ["Sully" Sullenberger safely landed a plane](#) in the Hudson River. YouTube is a convenient platform for staying abreast of the events of the day.

It's Relatable and Authentic

Because YouTube is a social media platform, it has provided opportunities for people to have a voice who never would have before. It's made it much easier for the average person to gain a following and become famous.

The rising generation values authenticity and relationships. One result of these characteristics is that teenagers tend to trust the stars they follow on YouTube more than they trust traditional celebrities, partially because they feel that [YouTube stars are more relatable](#). Mainstream celebrities carefully craft an image or even keep their personal lives very hidden, but people who have made it on YouTube seem more authentic (whether or not they actually are) because they are more open and often willing to show more of their everyday lives. It's easy for teens to see YouTubers as their peers.

YouTube stars not only seem more relatable but often do engage with their fans more than the average celebrity does. And somewhat ironically, because people value YouTube so highly, people who react to culture on YouTube eventually become influencers of culture themselves, so users want to pay attention to them for that reason as well.

———— What are the dangers of YouTube?

Wasting Time

It's not uncommon for people to remark that they got on YouTube to watch a video and then let themselves be sucked into watching videos for hours on end. One 18-year-old girl we spoke to said she never got enough sleep and, when asked why, explained that it was because she had to be on YouTube making sure she didn't miss anything. She usually did this until 2 or 3am every day, regardless of whether she had school the next day. YouTube is in fact *designed* for this to happen. That's why another video automatically starts loading when the one you're watching is finished (though this autoplay feature [can be turned off](#)).

Beyond doing what you can to protect your kids from objectionable content, make sure you're

teaching them what good stewardship looks like. How can you help them develop good habits when it comes to how much time they spend on YouTube? How do we know when we've gotten too much of a good thing and it has become a bad thing?

Comments

Reading through the comments on YouTube is like studying the graffitied bathroom stalls of the internet. These comments almost always contain statements that are explicit, obscene, and offensive. Or, if they aren't vulgar, they're usually garbage. Allowing your children to read the comments will almost certainly expose them to graphic content, so we recommend enabling Restricted Mode in order to turn them off. See below for how to do so.

Explicit Content

One easy way to encounter inappropriate content on YouTube is in the advertisements that run before a video. It's also possible for the suggested videos that appear after a video ends to be inappropriate. Some users also like to "troll" by posting a video that looks safe and then cuts to something objectionable right in the middle of it.

As with many other social media apps, because there is so much content on YouTube, the platform [relies on users to police what gets uploaded](#). **Whenever system is run in this manner, mature content always gets through, so there's always the chance that kids will be exposed to it.** Website [Protect Young Minds notes](#) that YouTube actually tolerates explicit content, particularly if those posts are earning a lot of money. More on that below.

[YouTube recently announced](#) it's hiring 10,000 people to vet the platform for content that isn't supposed to be there. It remains to be seen whether this decision will make a significant difference in the type of material that is allowed.

Perverted Content That Seems Kid-Friendly

It's very important to not assume that YouTube channels that look kid-friendly are kid-friendly. There are channels that look like they are clearly [intended for kids](#) that have bizarre, violent, or sexual content in them. These videos range from being a bit strange to being perverse. If you look into the different videos on YouTube that have [Spiderman and Elsa](#) as characters (or search "Elsagate"—but be careful), you'll find that many of them are fairly weird. These videos are often published on channels with words like "toys" or "family" in them so that they seem safe.

One example is the channel Toy Monster, which has a video titled "[Frozen Elsa Becomes HAIRY!](#)" During the course of the video, Elsa's body and entire face gets covered in hair. Later in the video she almost accidentally eats a miniature version of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. There's no graphic content in the video, but it's really strange and not the sort of media anyone would want a young child watching.

But the above video is fairly tame compared to some of the other videos that look kid-friendly but depict depraved behavior. These videos have cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse or Elsa acting out various types of deviant and twisted behavior. [While this video](#) has strong language throughout, it does give a pretty good analysis of the offensive content that is targeted to kids and which YouTube not only doesn't censor but sometimes even promotes. It's worth watching, especially if your younger children use YouTube Kids.

It is possible to use YouTube and never run across content like this. We're not trying to scare you into never letting your kids use YouTube again. But we do want to give you fair warning of the dangers on the platform and emphasize the importance of you, the parent, vetting the content your younger children in particular are watching.

— What should I do?

Historically speaking, Christians have struggled with how to react to changes in culture. While it takes work, we recommend teaching your kids how to use YouTube wisely. Doing so will be more helpful than going to one extreme of banning it completely or the other extreme of letting them watch whatever they want. Obviously, when and how you decide to let your kids use YouTube will depend on how old they are and your assessment of their maturity. Here are some suggestions for steps to take in that regard.

Parental Controls

If you have young kids and opt to download YouTube Kids, don't allow them to search for videos on their own. Curate the videos for them, watching them ahead of time or at least watching them with your kids.

As far as YouTube itself goes, parental controls are helpful to a point. If you turn on Restricted Mode, it will hide the comments for you. [To turn on Restricted Mode](#), go to the YouTube menu and click on Settings. At the very bottom of the screen, you'll see the option to turn the Restricted Mode on or off.

Note that Restricted Mode will catch some of the worst content out there, such as excessive violence or nudity, but it will not catch all inappropriate content, as mentioned. Also, you might have Restricted Mode turned on for one browser, but someone could still use YouTube with Restricted Mode off by using a different browser, a private browsing tab, or a different account. Frankly, the only way you can be **absolutely** sure that your kids are not being exposed to mature content is by either watching videos before they do or by watching videos with them.

However, there are [a few other strategies](#) you can implement to have more oversight over what your kids are watching. You can turn off Autoplay, so that when one video is done, another doesn't immediately start playing. This will help prevent an inappropriate video from automatically starting. **To turn Autoplay off**, start playing any YouTube video. Then click on the gear icon at the bottom of the video. You'll see an option to toggle Autoplay on or off.

Another strategy is to subscribe to channels you know you're ok with your kids watching. You can also create playlists for them with videos you've already watched. Finally, you could also add a third-party filter. See our upcoming guide on internet filters for more information.

Sorry, Reviews Won't Help That Much

It would be great if someone could rate and review every YouTube channel that existed, but reviewing channels is possible only at a minimal level. Common Sense Media has [a review of the current Top Ten YouTubers](#), and *Business Insider* has [a list of the 19 most popular YouTube stars](#) at the time of this writing (remember—these will likely change before too long). You can also go to the website [Social Blade](#) for detailed metrics on the most popular YouTube channels, videos, and genres.

But the amount of content on YouTube is so extensive and diverse that your children almost certainly watch many other videos and channels besides the most well-known ones. It's simply not practical for people to evaluate YouTube channels in the same way they could write a movie review. Not only is the amount of content on YouTube enormous, but it also changes quickly. Even if you rated a popular influencer such as PewDiePie one year, [he could reinvent himself the next year](#), and your review would be obsolete.

We Need to Talk to Our Kids, No Matter How Old They Are

While we're not going to have advanced conversations with our younger children about what

they're watching, we think it's critical to prepare them for encountering inappropriate content online. **This is true even if we're doing everything we can think of to protect them from it.**

Think about how you would have a conversation to protect your kids in case they encounter a sexual predator. You wouldn't go into great detail, but you'd make sure they understand no one should say certain things to them or ask certain things of them. If anyone ever does, they should come to you immediately and not be afraid to tell you what happened.

Use a similar strategy when it comes to your kids going online, even if you are tightly controlling their internet use. Make sure your children know that if they see a video that disturbs or scares them, they can come to you and you won't be angry with them. If they hear words they don't understand, they should ask you what they mean. If they see someone's private parts, they should tell you and not be afraid. Having a conversation like this won't hurt anything, and you could end up protecting them in an unexpected situation.

It's essential they know that they can talk to you without fear. Countless people are accidentally exposed to online porn at young ages. They then develop addictions to it because they were curious and/or afraid to tell their parents. **It's no longer a question of if you need to have these conversations with your kids. You need to have them, with your girls as well as your boys.** Assume they will be exposed, and do everything you can to prepare them for that possibility.

What about Teens?

A good rule of thumb is: **Don't rely on anything in and of itself to filter out inappropriate content.** There is simply too much content for a third-party service to screen out everything that would be bad for your children to see.

Another rule of thumb that applies to all your kids on some level is: **Be aware of what videos your children are watching.** With your younger kids, you'll have more control over what they watch. With your older kids, you should try to be aware of what they're viewing and give them guidance. [Common Sense Media recommends](#) asking your older kids the following questions to get a sense of their online activity:

- What's trending today?
- What channels do you subscribe to?
- What's in your library?
- What was the last video you shared?

Engage with What They Love

Can you remember being a kid and loving something that your parents didn't understand or care about at all, like collecting baseball cards or playing Pac-Man at the video arcade? How much would it have meant (or did it mean) to you to have your parents really try to understand why you loved the music you did or what you enjoyed so much about your favorite hobby? In the same way, if your kids love a certain YouTuber or have a favorite video, ask them to tell you about it. Take the time to care and to understand why they like it. Even if the content is silly or immature, they will appreciate you making an effort to understand their world.

Here are some questions about YouTube you can discuss with your children:

- What do you like about YouTube?
- What do most of your friends like to watch on YouTube?
- What are some of your favorite videos on YouTube? Favorite channels? Favorite YouTubers?
- Have you ever learned anything new through YouTube?
- How do you think people are using YouTube in good ways?

- How have you seen people using YouTube in bad ways?
- Have you ever run across inappropriate content? What did you do?
- What if you started watching a video you thought you'd enjoy, but realized it contained disturbing, graphic, or otherwise inappropriate content? Would you click away, or would you keep watching it?
- How can you tell when a video is bad enough that you need to click away? What makes it hard to stop watching a video once you've begun?
- How can you tell when it's a bad idea to watch a video in the first place?
- What are some of the consequences of viewing graphic content?
- What's an example of a YouTube video that you think took something too far?
- What do you think is a reasonable amount of time to spend on YouTube?
- How can you guard against letting your time online consume your free time?
- How can your time on YouTube enhance your time off YouTube?

Disciple Them in Healthy Habits

In our [Guide to Smartphones](#), we recommended coming up with a contract with your teenagers for how they use their phones. Even if you don't want to be so formal with how you structure their time on YouTube, it's still good to make your expectations clear. Your kids should know what they should and shouldn't watch and what the consequences of breaking those rules will be.

Encourage healthy family habits overall when it comes to technology. **We recommend having a policy not to allow devices in bedrooms at night.** This rule will help you and your kids rest better (by not staring at a screen for hours before going to bed). And it will make it easier for your kids not to watch porn or other inappropriate content in private. You could also put limits on how much time they spend on the internet.

As always, pray, pray, pray. It's so easy to forget about the importance of prayer, and it can feel like we're not doing much when we do pray. But prayer is the most powerful and effective resource we have at our disposal. Pray that God would bring anything that your teenagers are hiding from you into the light. Pray for protection from the enemy. Pray for their hearts to be wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord. Pray for them to hate what God hates and love what He loves. Pray for them to use their time wisely.

Conclusion

Despite its dangers, YouTube is a good resource that can be used prudently. Filters and parental controls are helpful, not a one-stop solution. You will need to not assume anything about what is or isn't OK on YouTube, while guiding your children on how to use the platform well.

The most important point to remember is that God is ultimately and finally in control. When your kids push your boundaries and watch content they know they shouldn't, He will be faithful. He will provide the wisdom you need as you seek it from Him. Remember, He loves your kids even more than you do.

Additional Resources

[“Is it OK for My Kid to Start Her Own YouTube Channel?”](#) Common Sense Media

[“Positive Role Models on YouTube,”](#) Common Sense Media

[“Can YouTube Survive the Adpocalypse?”](#) *New York Magazine*

[“Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations”](#)

[“Yes, You Can Make Six Figures as a YouTube Star...and Still End Up Poor,”](#) *Business Insider*

[“How Many Views Does it Take to Make Money on YouTube?”](#) Video Power Marketing

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Social Media Toolkit



SNAPCHAT

A Parent's Guide to **SNAPCHAT**

Contents (click to jump to section)

Welcome to the mysterious world of Snapchat	1
What is Snapchat?	1
What's a Snapchat "story"?	1
What's the difference between "My Story" and "Our Story"?	2
What's a "Snapstreak"?	2
What do emojis next to names mean?	2
What are Snap Maps?	3
Any other notable features?	3
What if I don't want my teen seeing specific stories?	4
Why do teens use it so much?	4
Who can see my child's snaps?	5
What are the dangers?	5
Can I see who my child is friends with?	6
Is it bad to ask to be friends with my child?	6
Can I access my child's account? Should I?	6
Are there Parental Controls? How do I use them?	7
At what age should I let my child use it?	7
How do I talk to my kids about it?	8
My child is sexting! Now what?!	9
How do I delete the app or an account?	9
Final thoughts.	10
Related Axis Resources	10
Additional Resources	11
Recap	12
Discussion Questions	13

Welcome to the mysterious world of Snapchat

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.

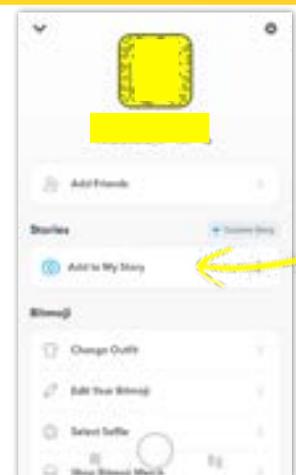
What is Snapchat?

A communication app that allows users to exchange pictures and videos that expire (disappear) after the amount of time a user chooses, between 1 and 10 seconds, or they can choose the “no limit” option, which has no time limit and does not expire after a certain number of seconds. Users can also exchange private chat messages that can be saved by tapping on the message, and pictures/videos can be screenshotted by the receiver (the sender will be notified if this happens—unless, of course, a user knows [how to get around the notification](#)— but they cannot stop the receiver from doing so). There are also calling and video chatting features, and over video chat users have the option to use Snapchat filters in real time.



What’s a Snapchat “story”?

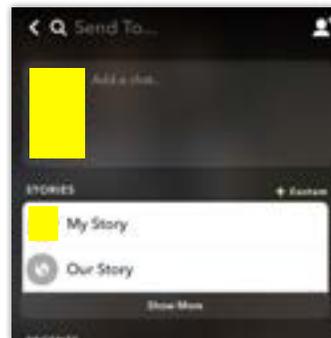
A set of photos or videos that [can be made public](#). The story is only viewable for 24 hours, but other users can view it an unlimited number of times during that window. (This feature has since been copied by [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).) Now’s a great time to mention that the best way to understand an app is to experience it ourselves. So we highly recommend downloading it and looking around, noticing different things like navigation, ease of use, features, how it makes you feel, etc. If you have someone



you trust, have them download the app, too, then try sending each other a few snaps.

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 an area's story (e.g. a concert, sporting arena, college campus, etc.; 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 🔥 emoji and a number, which indicates how long that streak has been going on. If a ⌚ 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 names mean?

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

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 swiping down on 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: My Friends (which allows anyone on a user’s friend list to see their location); My Friends, Except (which allows users to block certain friends from viewing their location); Only These 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?

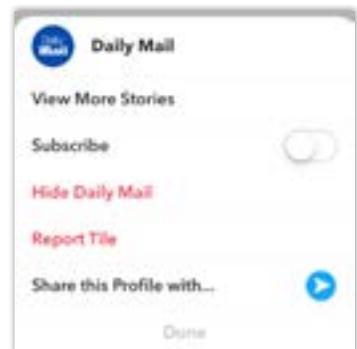
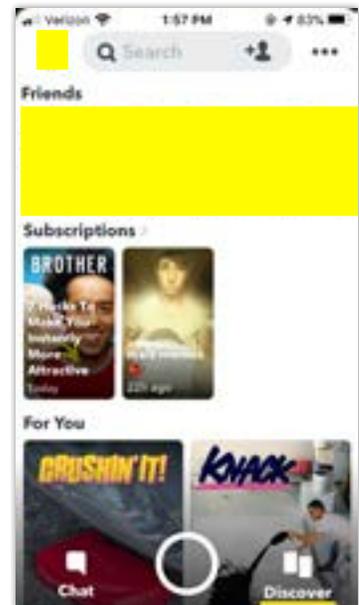
The [Discover section](#) is a place where brands can post their own curated stories for users to view, as well as where [new original TV shows](#) made specifically for Snapchat are found. As is true for traditional media outlets, the content in this section is full of ideas, good and bad, but it’s 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 seeing specific stories?

By swiping left from the main screen, a user accesses the **Discover page**. A user's friends' stories appear at the top of the page, underneath which are rows of stories from brands and celebrities, which are categorized as "For You." If a user decides he/she doesn't want to see content from a brand or a celebrity, he/she can simply tap and hold on that tile until a dialogue box (see second image) appears, then select "Hide [brand name]." (One can also tap and hold, then select "Subscribe" to be notified when that brand posts new stories.)

Clearly, Snapchat can't be modified enough to keep a user from finding or stumbling upon 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 teens use it so much?

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 someone across the globe with a push of a button, rather than spending time finding the perfect angle for a photo and highly editing it before posting. It's also much more casual and easy to keep up with than texting is, because whereas in a texting conversation you have to be pretty 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). 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. And of course, features like the Snapstreak seem to have been created simply to make the app more addictive and increase time spent on it.

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](#). Some users have exploited the ease of Snapchat to offer “premium” services. “[Snapchat Premium](#)” is the X-rated underbelly of Snapchat, in which users can pay for premium, sexually explicit content. [This girl's Snap scam](#) earns her \$1,000 in just one day (and most of her responses come from guys in their late teens to early twenties).

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.

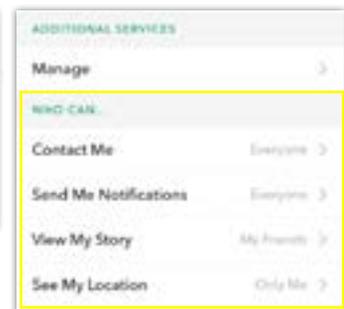
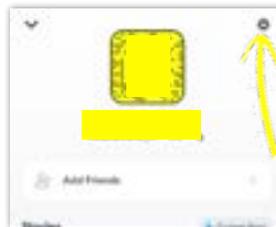
Can I access my child's account? Should I?

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.

Are there Parental Controls? How do I use them?

In terms of password-protected settings, no. It's possible to set up a user's privacy settings [in a more secure way](#) (see images on next page), but if a child has access to his/her account, then he/she can change these settings at any point. Currently, there's no way to block content from brands, but it's possible to block other users.



More reasons to talk to our kids about the risks of using the app and considering making them wait until a certain age before they can use it. As for setting time limits on the app, check out our [Parent's Guide to iOS](#) and our [Parent's Guide to Android](#) for using the phone's features to limit a child's daily use. But always remember to explain why you're implementing the limits and strongly emphasize that it's because you want what's best for them (not because you're a jerk who hates them).

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 to my kids about it?

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 TikTok or 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.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [Reclaiming the Smartphone: 4 Important Conversations](#) (free video series)
- [A Parent's Guide to iOS](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Android](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Internet Filtering & Monitoring](#)
- [Social Media Video Kit](#)
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- [Parents' Ultimate Guide to Snapchat](#), Common Sense Media
- [Using Snapchat's Privacy Settings](#), InternetMatters.org
- [A Snapchat Guide for Parents](#), Tom's Guide

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A Parent's Guide to **SNAPCHAT**

Recap

- Snapchat is a very popular communication app that allows users to exchange pictures, videos, and private chats.
- In Snapchat, all forms of communication disappear after the receiver closes them, unless they are saved or screenshotted.
- Snapchat “stories” are public photos or videos that disappear 24 hours after they are posted, and can be viewed by a user’s “friends” an unlimited number of times within the 24 hours.
- Snapchat “streaks” and emojis next to user’s names are used to indicate how strong two users’ “friendship” is.
- “Snap Maps” share the current location of the user with whoever is approved to see the location.
- Snapchat’s 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.
- Snapchat’s privacy makes it easy for teens to send sexually explicit content to other users without anyone knowing, as well as be subject to sexual content in the Discover section.
- While there are not a lot of parental controls, setting time limits and being aware of your child’s device activity are ways to try to monitor their Snapchat usage.
- With that, it is important to be in open conversation with your child about what the app is, why they use it, how it influences them, and the potential dangers it has or can bring about.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!



A Parent's Guide to **SNAPCHAT**

Discussion Questions

- **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?
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axis

Social Media Toolkit



TIKTOK

“There's huge enticement to get famous, which could encourage kids to do things they wouldn't normally do to get a larger audience.”

— **Frannie Ucciferri, *Common Sense Media***

A Parent's Guide to **TIKTOK**

Table of Contents

Gen Z's App to Beat	1
What is it?	1
How does it work?	2
What happens when I download TikTok?	3
What happens when I create an account?	3
How do I create a video?	4
What's in the home feed?	5
How do I search for specific accounts/videos?	5
Where are direct messages?.....	6
What should I know about profiles?	6
What are duets and stitches?	7
Can users livestream?	7
Does it cost any money?	8
Are there parental controls?.....	9
Why do kids love it?	9
What are its dangers?.....	10
How can we protect our kids?	11
Let's TikTok About It.....	12
Reflection questions	12
Call to Generosity.....	13
Sources.....	13

This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ❓ What is TikTok?
- ❓ What are its potential dangers?
- ❓ Why is it so popular with young people?
- ❓ How does it work?
- ❓ Are there any options for parental controls?
- ❓ How do I balance restriction and conversation?

Gen Z's App to Beat

[TikTok](#) has rapidly gained popularity among teens and tweens since its launch in 2016. As a destination for short-form mobile videos, users upload videos of themselves lip-syncing, telling jokes, dancing, etc.

For parents of young people who use the app (or keep asking to), it's helpful to know what it is, its pitfalls and dangers, and how to talk to them about it in order to help them pursue the flourishing God intends for us in every area of our lives.

What is it?

In 2023, much of the conversation about TikTok has centered around the [potential security threats](#) it may pose, and what the Chinese Communist Party might hope to do with the app's data. (In 2020, India—at that time TikTok's largest market—[banned](#) the app over geopolitical tensions.) But to fully understand TikTok and its appeal for Gen Z, we need to go back to the origins of the app: Musical.ly.

Launched in the U.S. in 2014, Musical.ly was a mobile app for making 15-second lip-syncing videos that quickly grew in popularity to [200 million registered users](#). It even partnered with NBC for the 2018 Winter Olympics to give its users special behind-the-scenes footage. Within the first weekend of the Olympics, [Musical.ly had produced over 10 million engagements](#).

It was reminiscent of the now-defunct Vine, a social media platform where users could share six-second-long videos (which could be amusing and clever and led to fame for a number of Viners, one notable example being [pop star Shawn Mendes](#)). Because of this, Musical.ly filled a hole for many Viners, as well as offered some new features.

According to [The Wall Street Journal](#), "Musical.ly's great innovation was making the video selfie a thing." The videos could be up to 15 seconds long, and users were able to add music to them, choosing from numerous songs in the app's database or from their own libraries. It was easy for users to creatively edit the videos by adding various effects. They could then share their creations either publicly or privately.

Musical.ly gave rise to quite a few teen stars in its own right. Famous users include [Jacob Sartorius](#), [Liza Koshy](#), and [Caleb Finn](#). But all of that ended when ByteDance, the Chinese parent company of TikTok (aka “Douyin” in China) that [purchased Musical.ly](#) in November 2017, decided to absorb Musical.ly into TikTok on [Aug. 2, 2018](#). The Musical.ly app was no more, and users’ accounts were migrated over to the highly similar TikTok app.

Now that it’s been combined with Musical.ly’s existing user base, ByteDance claims it has over [1.05 billion monthly active users](#) across 154 countries (as of April, 2023). Many wondered if the merge would turn off Musical.ly lovers, but the data seems to have shown the opposite. TikTok was the most-downloaded app in 2022 with [879.2 million global downloads](#), and has over [3 billion downloads](#) to date.

Although TikTok’s requirements limit use of the app to anyone 13 and older, it’s not very difficult to lie about your age. Some research [shows](#) that the largest proportion (25%) of US TikTok users are between 10 to 19 years of age.

How does it work?

TikTok’s [main features](#) (which will all be discussed more below) are:

- » **Video Creation:** Create, edit, and post videos.
- » **Effects:** Apply filters and other Snapchat-like effects to videos.
- » **Messaging:** Have text-message-style conversations with others and share TikToks with them.
- » **Video Viewing:** Watch others’ videos, like, and comment on them.
- » **Profile Viewing:** Like Instagram, users can view others’ profiles, which consist of a profile pic, following/follower stats, a bio, how many times their videos have been liked, and a feed of their posts. Users can also “pin” up to three videos at the top of their feed.
- » **Livestreaming:** Streaming video and interacting with others in real-time.

A lot of teens use TikTok to post videos of themselves lip-syncing and/or dancing to their favorite songs. Some sing or play instruments along with another song. Some create comedic skits, while others make DIY videos with music as a background track. Many make duets and stitches to participate in or comment on a trend or meme.

What happens when I download TikTok?

When we downloaded the app, it opened with a screen to either accept or decline their Terms of Service. Once we accepted, it asked us what topics we were interested in, with the option to skip that page. In order to follow others or create our own videos, it prompted us to sign up using a phone number, email address, Apple ID, or a Facebook/Google/Twitter/Instagram account.

What happens when I create an account?

After choosing how you want to sign up, it will ask for your birthday (which isn't ever shown to others). Because users under 18 now have to put in a passcode to [continue watching](#) after 60 minutes each day, some teens may simply say that they're older than they really are in order to bypass this. TikTok then asks users to create a password, after which it verifies that you're not a bot. It will also prompt you to add friends from your contacts, even if you choose "Don't allow" when it asks to access your contacts.

Once your account is created, you can now follow other accounts, have direct message conversations with other users, customize your profile, and post videos.

If someone [signs up](#) and says that they're between ages 13 and 15, their account will be made private by default, which means that only people you approve can follow you, view your profile, and watch your videos. If someone signs up and says that they are 16 or older, their account will be public by default, which means that everyone can choose to follow you, watch your videos and view your profile.

How do I create a video?

Tap on the plus sign in the middle of the bottom of the screen to create a video (you'll have to enable access to the microphone and the camera to do so). You can choose music or trending sound clips from movies, TV, and other media for the video by tapping "Sounds" at the top middle of the screen. There's also the option to shoot a video first and add music afterward.

Options when posting (mainly located on right side of screen):

- » Toggle between the front-facing camera and the back camera
- » A timer which counts down for either 3 or 10 seconds until the beginning of your video
- » "Retouch," which removes wrinkles and other so-called blemishes
- » Video color filters (like sepia or black and white)
- » The ability to choose different recording speeds
- » A Q&A feature, which allows you to make videos responding to comments submitted by other users
- » An effects tab including "Appearance" filters, green screens, and other animations
- » Upload photo/video from camera roll (uploaded videos can be up to [10 minutes long](#))
- » Photo templates (choose between different pre-made templates and upload your own photos)

At the bottom of the screen, you can toggle between 15-second, 60-second, and 3-minute record times. (Again, you can upload pre-made videos of up to 10 minutes, but in the app users can only record videos of up to 3 minutes.) After recording, users can post their video publicly or privately, share it to other social media platforms, share it in their story (a la Instagram/Snapchat), or save the video as a Draft.

Check out the "[Using TikTok](#)" category on their website for more detailed descriptions of all of its features.

What's in the home feed?

The Home feed (aka the For You Page, or fyp) is the default tab that appears any time you open the app. The Home button is located in the bottom left corner and shows videos posted by the accounts you're following ("Following"), as well as videos based on what you have previously liked ("For You"). Many TikTok users will spend most of their time here, watching and scrolling through algorithmically-selected videos, which is probably part of why TikTok ranks highly in the App Store's [Entertainment](#) category, as opposed to its [Social Networking](#) category. In many ways, TikTok functions more like a TV that tries to read your mind in order to keep you interested than it functions like a way to connect with your friends. For these reasons, looking at a child's For You Page is a good place for parents to get a sense of what accounts/videos their child is viewing when they use the app.

How do I search for specific accounts/videos?

Immediately to the right of the Home feed is the Discover tab. By tapping on that, you'll see a new screen (first image) that has a search bar across the top, under which is an automatically scrolling carousel of featured or trending accounts and hashtags. Beneath that, it lists trending hashtags with accompanying videos under each one. These hashtags update frequently and encourage users to post videos that have a particular theme, such as [#GlowUps](#) or [#VibeCheck](#).

Search results can be filtered by Top, Users, Videos, Sounds, or Hashtags. Simply by selecting one of these categories, the app will populate with what's trending in that category before you ever type anything.

Where are direct messages?

You can access TikTok's direct message system via the tab second from the right that looks like a chat bubble. This is where you access notifications (like how many people have liked your video or, as shown in the first image below, when someone is livestreaming) and Direct Messages. After tapping on the tab, you'll see an icon that looks like a paper airplane in the top right corner. That's where users can speak privately with each other.

If you send a direct message to someone else, the app will tell you that there is a possibility they will not receive the message because of their privacy preferences. If your account is public, TikTok will allow you to receive messages from anyone, but you can adjust this to only accept messages from followers, mutual friends, etc. Parents who are concerned about their kids receiving messages from strangers should make sure these settings are adjusted.

What should I know about profiles?

You can access your profile at the bottom right corner of the app, and there are many options for customizing a profile. By tapping "Edit Profile," you can add a picture, a video, a bio, and links to your Instagram and YouTube accounts. You can also share your profile on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and access your TikCode to make it easier for others to find your profile.

In others' profiles, you can see who they're following, who their followers are, how many likes they've received, what videos they've liked (if they make this public) and their public videos. Users can also post videos that only their friends can see.

What are duets and stitches?

After tapping the Share button on any video, tapping Duet lets you create a new video to play side-by-side (or picture-in-picture) with another video. Whatever audio is in the first video is the audio that will be on the duet. [Stitches](#), on the other hand, allow users to take a clip of someone else's video and show it in a sequence with their own. Stitches are often used to comment on others' TikToks, and duets are often used for things like harmonizing or recording live reactions to other's videos.

Can users livestream?

Users can stream live videos on TikTok LIVE once they have [at least 1k followers](#), and as long as they (claim that they) are at least 18. Users who livestream videos can receive likes, comments, emojis, and even TikTok "[diamonds](#)," which can be exchanged for real money.

When we looked at the TikTok LIVE, we saw one user showing off his drumming skills and another doing a Q&A session. One account was livestreaming a photoshoot in a mansion. Several seemed to be active vloggers, using TikTok to promote their Instagram and YouTube channels. Many users were using their livestreams to feature their fans in exchange for likes, follows, emojis, and diamonds.

Several characteristics that stood out to us about TikTok's livestreams were:

- » We had instant access to anyone anywhere in the world. We saw multiple livestreams in foreign languages, such as German or Spanish.
- » People seemed more than willing to spend money to send emojis to their favorite TikTokers.
- » It was easy to run across inappropriate content.
- » Many users (mainly those that the livestreamers were thanking and featuring in their feeds) looked like they were eight or nine years old.

Whether or not an account has the ability to livestream, it always has the ability to view others' livestreams. When watching a livestream, you not only view the video, but you also see emojis and comments on the screen as they're sent by others.

Livestreams can be whatever users make them. Some have used livestreams to answer questions about evangelism and the gospel. At the same time, an article in Forbes highlighted what should also be obvious: the ability to broadcast live, combined with young teens misrepresenting their age to get access to this feature, combined with (sometimes older) viewers' ability to send money to the streamers for doing things they like, can easily add up to a [dangerous and predatory situation](#). Parents should definitely be aware of whether their daughters and sons are participating in live-streaming, and what kinds of streams they have been a part of.

Does it cost any money?

On TikTok, users can send emojis to other users, but they're not free; they're more like virtual gifts given to show appreciation to other streamers. Some of the emojis that can be sent are Panda, Love Bang, Sun Cream, Rainbow Puke, Concert, I'm Very Rich, and Drama Queen. You [pay for them](#) by going to your profile and tapping on the 3 dots in the upper right corner to access Settings. Once there, tap on Balance. From this screen, you can tap on Recharge to purchase coins, which [range in price](#) from \$1.29 for 100 coins to \$134.99 for 10,000 coins. The emojis themselves vary in price, with the most expensive ones currently being "[Planet](#)" (15,000 coins or roughly \$202) and "[Lion Gift](#)" (30,000 coins or roughly \$405).

Livestreamers who receive an emoji gift will typically call out and thank the person who gave it, so spending money on emoji gifts can be a way for fans to feel noticed by the person they're watching.

Are there parental controls?

TikTok has a feature called Family Pairing. As ConnectSafely President & CEO Larry Magid [put it](#), “Family Pairing is an opportunity for parents and teens to collaborate on developing healthy online habits. It’s not parental control, it’s parental involvement and an opportunity for parents and teens to learn from each other.”

With that said, Family Pairing [does allow](#) parents to remotely disable DMs, set screen time limits, enable content restrictions, and [mute](#) TikTok notifications during certain times. The catch: parents must have their own TikTok accounts (boosting TikTok’s numbers), and their kids must allow them to link the accounts to each other (a privilege they can revoke at any time). But it’s worth being on any app your children are on anyway in order to keep an eye on things and understand what they’re experiencing. If you have kids on the app, here are [instructions](#) for how to enable Family Pairing.

TikTok also offers a feature called Digital Wellbeing, which is accessed via Settings. It offers a Restricted Mode (which uses an algorithm to attempt to limit videos that may not be appropriate for all audiences) and Screen Time Management (no more than 2 hours on the app per day). Both of these are protected by a passcode (different from the account password), meaning a parent can set the passcode and not give it to the child.

But if a child gets annoyed by this and hasn’t really built up their account, they can easily just log out of the account and create a new one without the parents knowing. This is why it’s important to not simply put strict boundaries on a phone without talking about them first.

Why do kids love it?

Simply put, TikTok is entertaining. It’s full of people being creative and funny, with memes, trends, skits, catchy music, makeup tutorials, and almost anything else you can imagine.

It can also feel like an opportunity to become famous. In 1968, Andy Warhol was attributed as saying, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes,” and many TikTokers have experienced that reality through the algorithm picking their video to be featured on others’ For

You Pages. As we've already said, users can also receive money from followers, and some users are [reportedly earning upwards of \\$80,000](#) through brand partnerships and gifts. Some teens might be enticed by being able to turn making fun videos into a job, rather than having to go to college and/or get a "real" job someday.

Another part of the allure of TikTok can be peer pressure. A lot of kids want to be on the app because their friends are on it. They don't want to be the only one who doesn't know what everyone's talking about.

The best way to find out why your kids use (or want to use) TikTok is to simply ask them. That will help you to best understand the underlying drives and needs they think it will fulfill, as well as how to plan conversations about the app.

What are its dangers?

As we said at the beginning, much of the conversation around the dangers of TikTok has involved fears about how the Chinese-owned parent company ByteDance will handle users' data. [Much](#) has been written about this, and TikTok has already been banned on [government devices](#) and [university campuses](#). We wrote about these concerns in an issue of our [Culture Translator](#) newsletter.

Other dangers have to do with how easy it is to view mature content, how easy it can be to connect with [online predators](#) (which we wrote about in the live-streaming section above), and the potential for cyberbullying.

News outlets occasionally write about [dangerous TikTok challenges](#), but the significance or prevalence of a challenge can sometimes be blown out of proportion. As always, the best way to tell what sort of challenges your teens have participated in or witnessed is to ask them directly.

There are always horror stories about [worst-case scenarios](#) that can happen to children using the app. Parents should be aware of these stories, and should know that inappropriate content can be pretty easy to find, and that a large number of the songs and sounds used in videos have explicit language or themes. But when we perused TikTok, many of the videos we saw could be described as "fluff." Most weren't offensive, and some were funny, endearing, and interesting. While there's obviously a draw to receive attention and validation, many TikTok videos can also be a creative outlet or expressive tool for the people making them.

How can we protect our kids?

Among other things, TikTok's [Community Guidelines](#) prohibit obscene, pornographic, and abusive content. TikTok relies on A.I. to help with content moderation, but also employs teams of [content moderators](#) whose job is it to review the worst of the worst—basically, anything that gets through the A.I. filter that users then report.

To be fair to the app's creators, [TikTok states](#) that it is not intended for kids under the age of 13. But ultimately, parents bear the responsibility for allowing their kids to be on the app, or at the least, knowing whether they are. At the end of the day, TikTok is a business; though obviously they will want to seem concerned and conscientious about users under 13, mental health issues (etc.), the bottom line is that more users and more screen time always adds up to more profit for businesses like TikTok.

So what can we actually do to protect our kids if they're on this app? Here are a few ideas:

- » Make their accounts private
- » Make sure they don't accept requests from anyone they don't know
- » Block certain accounts if needed
- » Report inappropriate content immediately
- » Utilize the features available through Family Pairing and Digital Wellbeing
- » Have conversations with them about online safety, identity, worth, value, etc.

For those who want their kids to avoid social media altogether, a mom named Anastasia Basil [suggests](#) incentivizing them to avoid it by offering to give our children a check for \$1,600 to spend however they want if they agree to stay off all social media until they're 16. It's an interesting idea; we reward our kids for so many other achievements, so why not, as Basil says, reward them for "winning at peer pressure"?

However you decide to handle TikTok and other social media apps in your home, ultimately it's up to you to take into account your children's ages, personalities, and maturity levels. Because of the easy access to mature content, we recommend that parents don't allow children under age 13 to use the app, and it might even be better to wait until they're older (Common Sense Media [recommends](#) 15+ years old).

Let's TikTok About It

God gave us desires to create and to be in community, and in some ways TikTok can be an outlet for these things. One of the main complications here though is that there's a huge pull toward wanting to get attention in the form of followers, comments, and likes. Growing your fanbase is much easier to do when your account is public than when it is private. And a public account can come with dangers and difficulties, especially for children. As Anastasia Basil, again, puts it:

If your child does not maintain an online self, chances are her social circle is small—friends from school, neighbors, family. If she has a rough day at school, a bell sets her free each afternoon. The jerks who taunted her at lunch aren't coming home with her for the night. She has space to think, to be with you, to read, to hug her dog, to recover, to get brave. Online, there is no school bell, there is no escape; she exists globally, and so do her mistakes. The ridicule is permanent.

If you decide to let your kids use TikTok, make sure to have consistent conversations with them about it. Make sure they're educated on the dangers of connecting with strangers online and that they have accountability.

And don't forget to pray, which is always the most important step you can take and the easiest one to neglect. You can't control your teens or protect them from every peril, but God will always know what's going on with them. Rely on Him first and foremost.

Reflection questions

- » What have you heard about TikTok from the news, the internet, other parents, and your children?
- » After reading this guide, have any of your opinions of it changed?
- » Do you have any new appreciation for why TikTok might be appealing to your teens?
- » Do you have any new concerns about potential negatives you want to help your kids avoid on TikTok?
- » What is your ultimate goal for your kids in conversations about social media?
- » How does your faith shape the way you think about TikTok and social media in general?

Call to Generosity

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org/give. Thank you!

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Social Media Toolkit



INSTAGRAM

“

We need to teach children how to cope with all aspects of social media—good and bad—to prepare them for an increasingly digitized world. ***There is real danger in blaming the medium for the message.***

—Sir Simon Wessely, President,
Royal College of Psychiatrists

Instant Gratification or a Never-Ending Search for Validation?

Though much younger than its predecessors, Instagram has become a social media behemoth through its simplicity, ease of use, and focus on imagery. Along with Snapchat, it's considered by many teens as a non-negotiable in their arsenal of online profiles. So what's the good, bad, and ugly of the app? Let's look at how the app is changing us, both for better and worse.

What is Instagram?

A free photo-sharing mobile app that was launched in 2010 to inspire creativity through visual storytelling. It quickly gained traction and now has [over 800 million users](#), ranging from celebrities to “influencers” (those with large social media followings) to brands to your average person. Since Facebook bought the company in 2013 for \$1 billion, Instagram's growth rate [has exponentially increased](#): It now adds some 100 million users every few months, and [over half of its users use the app daily](#). Instagram's Stories feature, adapted from Snapchat, now has approximately [300 million users](#), outpacing the app it was adapted from.



How popular is it?

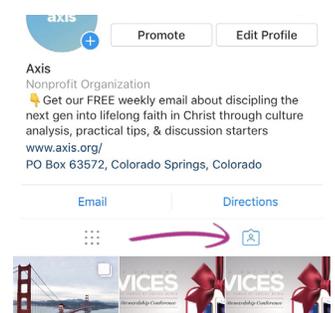
Instagram is [most popular among people younger than 25](#), and those users spend on average more than 32 minutes a day on the app. In addition, “Statistics show that 20% of all Internet users are on Instagram, and the Pew Research Center found that 52% of teens say that Instagram is their favorite social networking site.”

How does it work?

At its most basic, the mobile app (for both iOS and Android) allows a user to take/upload a photo or video, choose whether or not to make edits to the file, add a caption, choose whether or not to share it to their other social media accounts (like Facebook and Twitter), and “post” it to their profile. Other users who have “followed” that user will see the post in their “feeds” and can choose to “like” (denoted by a ) , comment on, share, bookmark, or report it.

Beyond that, a user can now upload multiple photos or videos in a post, as well as create collages (using Instagram's other app [Layout](#)). Photos/videos can also be edited and have filters applied within the app. Posts can be edited (only the captions, not the photo itself) or deleted at any point after posting. In addition, a user can “tag” another user in a post, which causes that post to appear in a tab on the other user's profile (see photo). Finally, a user can also add his or her location to a post (this feature is especially important to discuss with teens). [This article explains](#):

Teens can easily share the location of where they took the picture when they post. This setting allows users to tag a picture to a particular address or location. If you click on that location once



the post is up, the app brings you to a map and a small dot that shows exactly where they were when they took the picture. We saw so many pictures that we were able to easily click on and even see the users' home locations or their favorite coffee shops that they just might visit regularly. To ensure safety, follow these directions: Go to your teen's phone settings, select "Instagram," click on "location," select "never."

It's important to note that though the app was originally designed to work solely via smartphones, there is now a [feature-limited web interface](#) from which one can do everything except post (at time of publication). So simply erasing the app from a phone does not fully limit access to it.

Can you explain its important features?

For those who have no familiarity with the app, Instagram has three distinct pages, or tabs: the profile, the home feed, and the explore tab.

Users' **profiles** (see photo) can be [set to either private or public](#), and, much like other social networks, users can "follow" another's profile (if the profile is private, they must first be "approved" by the user before viewing any of their posts). To follow an account, locate the other user by searching for their name or "handle" (aka username; denoted by the @ symbol). For example, @AxisIdeas leads to Axis' account. This profile includes the user's profile picture, any personal information the user shares in his or her bio (limited to [150 characters](#)), number of followers, number followed by that account, and, most notably, all the photos/videos the user has posted or been tagged in.

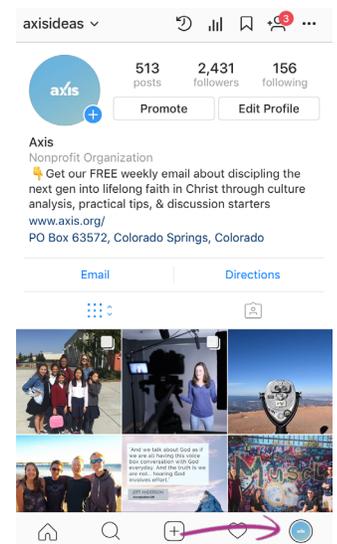
What Parents Need to Know

According to Instagram's [Terms of Use](#), the age requirement to use the service is 13. The reason for this is because of the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act](#) (COPPA), which establishes that websites and online services cannot collect data on children under the age of 13 without parental consent. If someone younger than 13 joins Instagram by using a fake birthdate during registration for the app, COPPA cannot protect them.

Just because your child is tech-savvy at the age of 10 doesn't necessarily mean that he or she is mature enough to use social media sites. It can be difficult for children to truly understand the impact of their online actions (or the impact of actions against them), which can be particularly harmful when it comes to cyberbullies, "trolls," and online predators.

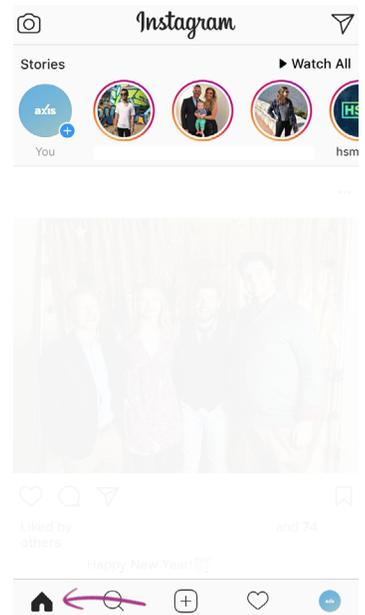
Once legally old enough to join the service, it's a good idea to [make sure that your teen's account is private](#) rather than public and to discuss with your teen the issues surrounding online safety and privacy. Teens often don't understand the permanence and potential repercussions of sending information out into the virtual world.

Other conversation topics: The fluidity of online identities. Online profiles make it easy and tempting to "reinvent" ourselves or to project a certain image or persona, even if it's not authentic. *It's common for users to even juggle multiple Instagram accounts.* There is a difference between re-creating our image over social media and being transformed into the likeness of Christ—between the biblical concept of "taking off the old self and putting on the new" and projecting a new identity via social media that might be a far cry



from who we actually are and who God calls us to be.

The **home feed** is the tab (see photo) where a user can scroll through all the photos/videos posted by accounts a user follows, as well as “sponsored” posts (i.e. ads). The profiles a user follows can be those of other individuals, impersonal accounts (e.g. @cats_of_instagram), or verified accounts of celebrities, influencers, and brands (indicated by a ).



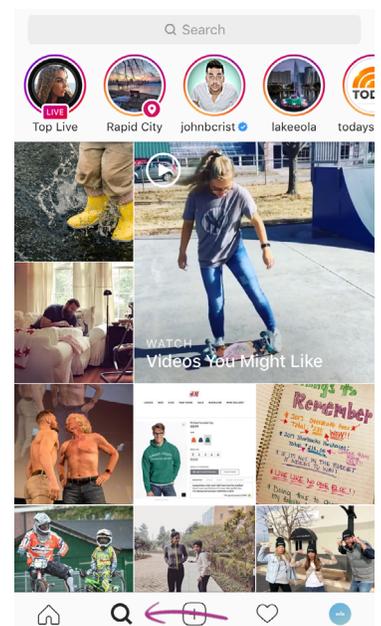
What Parents Need to Know

Although Instagram traded in Facebook’s “Friend” title for Twitter’s more ambiguous “Followers” as a way to refer to those with whom a user connects and interacts, it can be easy for teens to scroll through an Instagram home feed and feel as though they are truly connected to those they follow, to believe they have true insight into their lives, whether or not they have real-world interactions with them. However, it’s important to make teens aware that, just as they have the ability to project an inauthentic online image and persona, so do those they follow.

Instagram can be a good tool for connection on one level; however, teens also need to realize that they cannot replace their God-given, deep need for real-world community with virtual interactions, which can be a false and unfulfilling substitute. It’s easier to settle for virtual interactions because they are [cognitively and emotionally easier](#) than real-world ones, but easier does not mean better, deeper, or more authentic. Discuss with your teen how he or she can use Instagram as a way to supplement real-world relationships, instead of allowing the app to replace or diminish them.

More information about identity and community in regards to Instagram can be found below in the discussion about Instagram and mental health.

Instagram’s **Explore** (i.e. search) tab (see photo) was added in 2012. At the top of the tab is a search bar for finding other people and content by entering in names, handles, hashtags, words, and phrases. (Note: The app does keep track of a user’s search history, [but it can easily be cleared](#).) Below this, the Explore tab uses algorithms to show users a variety of curated content based on location, what’s trending, and individual users’ interests. This is *not* content from profiles the user follows; it’s content that Instagram algorithmically suggests to the user. Among the thumbnails of photos and other videos, the “Videos You Might Like” personalized video channel is a distinct feature of the Explore tab. You tap on the “Videos You Might Like” thumbnail, wherein the first video is playing on a loop, to watch the full, enlarged version with sound. Immediately after the first video finishes, the screen scrolls down (or you can scroll manually) to the next video.



What Parents Need to Know

The quote, “Music may not tell you what to think, but it does tell you what to think *about*,” can easily be applied to Instagram: Instagram may not tell you what to think, but it does tell you what to think about. But it may even go a step further, subliminally telling us what to like, as the author of [this New York Times article writes](#):

[Instagram’s Explore feature] provides curated randomness—a category that can exist only in an era of algorithms. The distance between what I like and what Instagram thinks I might like is oceanic, preposterous, deranged. And yet the algorithm is not wrong. I press the “like” button on a picture of my friend, and the Explore page shows me albino crocodiles. I comment on a cute dog, and the Explore page offers circus contortionists. Suddenly I like those things, too.

Adding to this is Instagram’s [reorganization of the home feed](#) according to “the likelihood you’ll be interested in the content,” rather than by the order in which items were posted (a change that was [much protested by users](#)).

Ads were also added to the home feed in 2013. Unlike Facebook, ads on Instagram, however, are shown regardless of the user’s interests, which complements the “curated randomness” of the Explore tab.

Furthermore, the “Videos You Might Like” channel offers a laid-back viewing experience, the clip-after-clip montage catering to short attention spans and encouraging more time spent on the app.

Conversation topics: What does it mean to *explore*? Instagram is defining exploration as something that happens on a screen. How is this different from exploring God’s creation through real-world experiences, discovery, and adventures? How can we use Instagram to supplement and complement our real-world experiences, rather than letting it curb innovation and actual exploration?

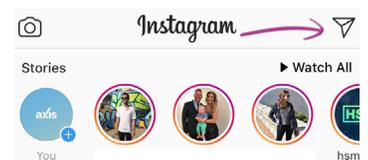
What are hashtags?

As with other social media apps, hashtags (i.e. “#” followed by words and/or numbers) have been an integral part of how Instagram operates since its inception. They are essentially a way to promote a photo, though they can also just be a way to add parenthetical humor to a post (a post-workout photo might be captioned with “#mylegsarekillingme”). For example, captioning a photo with “#fitness” will link that photo to all the other content on the app with the same hashtag. Then when a user searches “#fitness” in the Explore tab (or by tapping on the hashtag when it appears below a photo or video), the user is taken to a page with all the content containing that hashtag.

There are many things to understand when it comes to hashtags. For example, it’s common practice for users to caption their content with the most popular hashtags (check out the top 100 [here](#)) in order to gain viewership and followers. In addition, there are many hashtag trends, like hashtags for every day of the week. #mcm = Man-Crush Monday and is used to show affection for a significant other or a celebrity one likes (similar to #wcw = Woman-Crush Wednesday). Also, #tbt (Throwback Thursday) and #fbf (Flashback Friday) are used with a photo from the past, even if that past is as recent as yesterday. Finally, users can also now “follow” hashtags like they follow other users in order to be updated when new content is tagged with that hashtag.

What’s Instagram Direct?

It’s Instagram’s version of private messaging, which was launched in 2013 and is denoted by a paper airplane icon (see photo). Via Instagram Direct, users are able to send messages containing text, photos, videos, and/or others’ posts to one or multiple users. Like



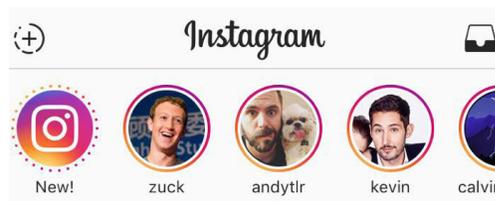
Snapchat, photos and videos sent in this way can be set to disappear immediately after viewing.

It's important to note that 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. In addition, Instagram Direct conversations can be erased.

Conversation topics: The false security of "private" online interactions; how to [decline to view direct messages from unknown users](#), as well as [block and report](#) them; (If you have access to your teen's direct messages and notice a lot of disappearing content) talk to them as to why they choose disappearing over permanent.

What are Stories?

In 2016, Instagram added a Stories feature (adapted from Snapchat, like many of Instagram's features) to its app. This feature allows a user to upload videos and/or photos to their "Story" that disappear after 24 hours. If a user has an active story, a colorful rim will appear around their profile picture (see photo). The home feed depicts, at the top of the page, all the profile pictures of users who have active stories (see photo). Tapping on an indicated profile picture will show that user's picture(s) and/or video(s) (depending on how many "stories" the user has uploaded in the last 24 hours). The content can be viewed as many times as desired before it disappears. In addition, users can now "live stream" themselves and their experiences in real time via their Stories, a feature that was added later in 2016.



Why would someone want to post to their Story instead of to their profile?

Instagram was originally meant to be an app for instant photo and video sharing of immediately present moments (hence the prefix "insta-"). Over time, users instead began sharing photos outside of the present moment—photos of moments that had happened previously that were then edited. These photos were often initially captioned with the hashtag #latergram to designate to one's followers that it was not a true Instagram. However, this caption is now usually left off altogether, as users' profiles (and, as a result, Instagram itself) has become more about artistry, photography, and edited content. Users, generally speaking, no longer want to post those blurry, spontaneous, insta-photos.

However, Instagram's adaptation of Snapchat's Stories feature combats this and provides users with the means to post artistic, edited, more professional-looking photos to their profiles—photos which are more permanent in that they do not automatically disappear but, rather, can only be manually deleted—while maintaining the spontaneous, insta-sharing nature of the app. The Stories feature can be good in that it tends to promote authenticity, rather than the "highlight reel" nature of the regular, often highly edited posts.

Conversation topics: The false security that the "disappearing" content lends itself to; how to keep personal information private and out of one's Story; the need to be aware and cautious of what is said and done over live stream. (As an example, one Instagram influencer accidentally live-storied herself having sex with her boyfriend. **What happens live cannot be taken back.**)

— Is Instagram “art”?

For many, Instagram is an artistic, creative expression. In [her fascinating TED talk](#), Jia Jia Fei discusses Instagram’s impact on art standards and the entire art world. Art standards are becoming more relative and subjective. Now everyone is a photographer. Instagram, other social media sites/apps, and the Internet as a whole also contribute to changing art standards by replacing museums as the art authority. Fei also talks about how the way we experience art has changed through the digitization of images. However, she ends her presentation on a hopeful note by calling on museums to cross over into the digital space, reclaim their authority in the art world, and utilize apps like Instagram for engagement and education.

Conversation starter: Watch Fei’s TED talk with your teen, then discuss the topics she covers and questions she poses during her presentation. How can we keep creativity and artistic expression via Instagram from becoming more about convenience than quality?

— What’s a “Finsta”?

Short for “[Fake Instagram](#),” these are second (or third or fourth) accounts that teens have to either get away from the prying eyes of concerned adults OR to simply have a “pressure-free” account in which they’re unconcerned about posting the perfect shot or getting lots of likes. While the latter reason is understandable, the former is what’s concerning. Teens who have Finstas for this reason often want a place to post pictures they don’t want their parents to see.

While many of us are quick to think that our kids would never do that, it doesn’t hurt to ask. When doing so, simply be calm and ask if they have a Finsta. If they admit to it, gently move into questions about why they feel the need to have one, if you can see it, etc. If they say they don’t, they may be telling the truth! Either way, make sure to remind them that they can tell you anything, that you’re there for them, and that you want what’s best for them.

— Why do teens care so much about how many followers and likes they get?

Largely (if not exclusively) because of hashtags, one of the primary focuses of using social media apps like Instagram has become self-promotion. It’s the new way to build a brand and a business around one’s passion. Some of the most recognized celebrities and influencers (like [Kim Kardashian](#), for example) now exclusively advertise their products over social media. Beyond that, though, many everyday, average teens want to gain a following and become influencers. Why? It’s validating, and it’s the new fast track to fame and significance.

In essence, one’s number of followers, likes, and views has to come to equate to one’s social value. The more followers and likes, the more popular—and valuable—a person is. In fact, most Gen Zers [care less about being invited to parties](#) or having lots of friends at school and much, *much* more about their number of followers, their “Snap Scores” (see our [Parent’s Guide to Snapchat](#) for more info), how many positive comments they get, etc. So if your teen happens to be obsessing over their numbers, this is likely why.

Developmentally this all makes sense. Teens are especially preoccupied with identity and ego based on their stage in life. It’s not anything bad; in fact, it’s age appropriate. They are learning who they are, what makes them unique, and what makes them special. But, if they continue to seek significance or validation from others instead of finding their inherent worth

as Christ's beloved, their thirst for external significance will never be quenched.

Conversation questions: What are your reasons for wanting an Instagram account? Could there be an element of self-promotion and/or validation? Or is there another, greater purpose? What would it look like to use your profile for positive influence? What do you think happens to a person when they are valued for their "numbers"? Do you think your social following is a true reflection of who you are and your value? How does this mentality line up with what God says about our worth and value?

— How do the "liking" and "commenting" features affect my teen?

The validation of having someone else like or leave an encouraging comment on your content is a form of positive reinforcement, which releases serotonin. And the unpredictability of whether or not feedback will be positive is what makes social media addiction a real phenomenon. Shirley Cramer, Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Public Health (RSPH), [says that](#) "Social media has been described as more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol, and is now so entrenched in the lives of young people that it is no longer possible to ignore it when talking about young people's mental health issues."

Ironically, if a teen has a public account, chances are many of the comments he or she receives are posted by a "bot"—basically, an automation that goes on "[following, commenting, and liking sprees](#)" as a "rogue-marketing tactic meant to catch the attention of other Instagram users in hopes that they will follow or like the automated accounts in return."

Bob Gilbreath, Chief Executive of Ahalogy (a marketing technology company in Cincinnati), [explains](#): "The follower count is really completely meaningless. It's untrustworthy for the true following, and it's certainly untrustworthy for the quality of the creative work." Calder Wilson, a professional photographer, says, "When you have [a bot] coming in there and leaving fake comments like 'stunning photo' and 'stunning gallery' and there's no one behind it and then the likes—it's as if they hijacked that personal neuro pathway in your brain."

For teens who are even more vulnerable to this type of "hijacking," getting more likes, comments, and followers can be exhilarating and validating. But the opposite is also true: When they don't receive the numbers they were hoping to receive on a post, they will often feel rejected, unloved, and unwanted. Many will remove posts if they don't perform as desired.

We can protect teens from this kind of false commenting simply by ensuring that their accounts are kept private and unable to be accessed by random accounts. **HOWEVER**, simply requiring that they keep their accounts private without any explanation will do us and them no good. We must help them understand why we require this, which means having loving conversations about validation, worth, fame, "friendship," comparison, and much more. If we skip the conversations, this will only serve to alienate them from us, and if they're determined enough, they will find ways around our rules.

To help protect teens from cyberbullying via comments (and this applies whether a teen has a private account or a public one), in December of last year Instagram [rolled out a tool](#) that allows users to block comments containing specific keywords, and a month later the company [introduced a feature](#) that allows users to disable comments completely on individual posts.

How does the app impact my teen's mental health?

A new study, called [#StatusOfMind](#) and published in the U.K. by the RSPH's Young Health Movement, examined the positive and negative effects of social media platforms on young people's mental health. It revealed that Instagram is the worst app for young people's mental health. The 1,479 14- to 24-year-olds polled were asked to rate five different social media platforms—YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram—on 14 different issues, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep (quality and the amount of sleep), body image, bullying, and FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). Instagram received the worst marks on every issue (the other social media platforms were ranked in the order given above, with YouTube being the most positive). Instagram was most positively rated on self-expression (the expression of your feelings, thoughts, and ideas) and self-identity (ability to define who you are). But, as previously discussed, conversations need to happen even around these “positively-rated” issues.

However, Sir Simon Wessely, president of the U.K.'s Royal College of Psychiatrists, encourages **educating young people about how to use social media platforms well, rather than demonizing social media**. [He says](#), “I am sure that social media plays a role in unhappiness, but it has as many benefits as it does negatives. We need to teach children how to cope with all aspects of social media—good and bad—to prepare them for an increasingly digitized world. ***There is real danger in blaming the medium for the message***” (emphasis added).

Instagram and other social media platforms can also lure users into [comparison](#) (with other users by viewing their posts and content), which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and envy—commonly referred to as “Facebook Envy.” Not coincidentally, the two worst-ranked platforms—Snapchat and Instagram—are both image-focused.

Hanna Krasnova, co-author of a study on Facebook and envy, [says that](#) “A photo can very powerfully provoke immediate social comparison, and that can trigger feelings of inferiority. If you see beautiful photos of your friend on Instagram, one way to compensate is to self-present with even better photos, and then your friend sees your photos and posts even better photos, and so on. ***Self-promotion triggers more self-promotion, and the world on social media gets further and further from reality***” (emphasis added).

The #StatusOfMind study found this issue of comparison most prevalent among young women in regards to body image. The [author of the report explains](#) that Instagram draws young women into comparison by promoting “unrealistic, largely curated, filtered, and Photoshopped versions of reality.” A hundred years ago, a young woman likely had only a small pool of others to compare herself to: those in her local community. Now young women are throwing their posts and self-images up against unlimited numbers of others. This is new territory.

How do I talk to my teens about comparison and body image?

There is now a trend gaining momentum to combat comparison and the unrealistic standards that young women have been attempting to attain for so long. The forerunners of this movement include [Tess Holliday](#), [Lena Dunham](#), and [Ashley Graham](#)—all celebrities and influencers with huge followings on Instagram. Phrases like “body love,” “self love,” “love yourself,” and “love the skin you're in” are often attached to this movement. Tess Holliday,

who is involved more in the online aspect of it, calls it BoPo—short for “body positive.” [Body Positivity](#) is ultimately about embracing the normalcy of all body types and characteristics, not just those traditionally labeled as beautiful, and about “opening the door” to those who have disabilities, disorders, and stereotypically un-beautiful appearances, in a way that “transcends language” and “is visual in nature.” These influencers, as well as Claire Mysko, the Chief Executive of National Eating Disorders Association, encourage Instagram users to curate their feeds and online experiences to that end.

But this is tricky. The Body Positivity movement is meant to combat an area of our culture that desperately needs to be addressed and changed—the unrealistic standard of physical beauty young women struggle under and their self-worth that culture constantly attacks—but the cultural answer to the cultural problem rings hollow (and can even promote narcissism) because it’s still based on externals. Sure, it changes the conversation to broaden our perspective on beauty, but in the end, The Body Positivity movement is still placing one’s worth on the body and not our intrinsic worth in Christ.

If the identity and worth of human beings overall, and specifically young women in this regard, is completely dependent upon God’s identity and the worth He’s created into us, how can we adequately create change in this area apart from Him? What the Body Positivity movement offers is only a shadow of the abundant life and identity–security that God desires for young women. We must affirm to our teenage daughters that worth is not something they have to exhaustively fight to assert and assign to themselves (as the Body Positivity movement often tends to encourage young women to do); it is already intrinsic to who they are because of who God is and *who He says they are*. Identity is not meant to be self-assigned, but, rather, divinely-authored.

As parents, it’s also important that we confirm God’s truth about our teenage daughters through words of validation and affirmation. Young women may be less inclined to seek that validation from social media or be made insecure by what they’re exposed to there if they are edified and their God-given worth affirmed within the home.

Pay attention to the accounts your teenage daughter follows and notice if there are accounts that have a disproportionate number of selfies, especially revealing ones. Ultimately, the Body Positivity movement fights a negative emphasis on physical appearance with a positive emphasis on physical appearance. However, biblically, the emphasis is not physical at all: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment [...] Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Peter 3:3-4, NIV). Guiding teenage daughters into confidence and security in their physical appearance, helping them to recognize their God-given worth, while also teaching them to value even more the fashioning of their character, cannot adequately be addressed in this guide (nor is the primary purpose of it). However, there are other helpful resources linked at the end for getting this conversation with your teenager started.

— Can a user access inappropriate content on the app?

Instagram desires to foster a positive environment and has strict “[community guidelines](#)” and policies against inappropriate and sexually explicit content. Public content is moderated by Instagram and can be reported as inappropriate by other users and subsequently removed by the company.

That being said, teens can quickly learn hashtags and secret emoji codes that will direct them to explicit content. Certain hashtags have been used for the illegal sale of drugs, and porn is

often hidden under foreign language hashtags.

Instagram has combatted users' attempts to circumvent their policies regarding explicit content by implementing two different strategies: a "hard ban" and a "soft ban." A hard ban means that [a hashtag will return no results](#) (for example, searching for #porn yields no results), whereas a soft ban means that certain images will be prevented from appearing under a hashtag. Other content is viewable but with a warning and an option to get help. For example, searching the hashtag #thinspo (short for "thin inspiration," often used by young women struggling with eating disorders) will only return results for #healthinspo, while searching for #thinspiration will result in a pop-up that warns the user that he/she is searching a hashtag often linked with self-harm and allows him/her to choose to "See Posts Anyway" or "Get Support."

Luckily (and somewhat surprisingly), "[Instagram's strict community guidelines](#) on nudity and aggressive band of content moderators mean that most of the really titillating stuff has a relatively short shelf life. The term 'Instaporn' has a double meaning: It's porn that's gone in an instant."

So although there is sexually explicit content on the app, Instagram typically makes it difficult enough to find and view the content that it's not worth the effort when it's so readily available elsewhere. A more legitimate reason for concern may be the content that can be privately shared between users via "disappearing" photos and videos.

— How do I talk to my teens about the app and its place in their lives?

Open-Ended Discussions

Allow their interest in and use of Instagram to be an on-going but balanced conversation (it might not a good idea to comment on *everything* they post). Let them know that you are a safe place to go to when they experience struggles with or need wisdom about social media. If you allow your teen to have an Instagram account, consider setting up one for yourself as well so you can better monitor their activity, relate to them, and interact with them in the digital spaces they occupy.

Accountability and Boundaries

If/when you choose to allow your teen to have an Instagram account, he/she will need your guidance and wisdom to interact with this social media app *well*. Establishing boundaries and accountability is part of this. Instagram does not have any parental controls within the app, but there is software you can download to monitor (to some extent) your teen's use of the app, which are linked to in the resources section at the end of this Guide.

One of these, [Qustodio](#), allows parents to monitor *how much* time teens spend on social media apps. This is important because, according to the #StatusOfMind study, "The report also found that it's not just what young people are engaging with on social media but also how long they are engaging with it. Young people who spend more than two hours per day connecting on social networking sites are more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress." Setting boundaries around how much time teens spend on different social media platforms can protect them against the addictive-nature of those platforms. Qustodio also allows parents the ability to set certain hours during which their teen can access different social media apps (for example, the teen could only access social media apps on his or her phone from 5-6pm, after school hours but before dinnertime). Qustodio can also block certain apps from being downloaded, and it can disable your teen's phone completely, except calls,

during set times (like during the night).

Another strategy is to [turn off Instagram notifications](#) so that teens do not feel compelled to enter the app every time they are notified of activity around their account.

Finally, consider and discuss with your teen the benefits of occasionally “fasting” from Instagram. Taking intermittent social media breaks is a way to create space in our lives to re-prioritize and self-evaluate and to remind ourselves that social media apps can be *useful tools*, but they are not our source of life, value, identity, or joy.

Final thoughts

Instagram is not inherently evil. Like Sir Simon Wessely said, we cannot blame the medium for the message. Whether or not we decide to allow our teens to use Instagram (which is a personal parenting decision based on each teen and their journey), ultimately we need to educate them about how to have wisdom in this increasingly digitized culture.

One of [Axis’ traveling teams](#) of 20- to 24-year-olds was once told by a wise mother they met while traveling: “Don’t live your life to make an impression; live your life to make an impact.” Instagram can easily become about making a good impression and the comparison and competition of highlight reels. But how can we encourage our teens to use this app as *one* way in which they are able to have an impact? How can we encourage them to use Instagram in ways that are others-focused—to give, encourage, influence, and impact, instead of to get validation, entertainment, escape, etc.? How can they *utilize* Instagram (instead of letting the app control them) as a platform for positive influence?

Ultimately, we want to raise our kids to passionately pursue the best life God has for them. We don’t do that by allowing them to do whatever they want whenever they want, nor by banning everything and explaining nothing. Rather, we do that by disciplining, conversing with, and loving them, always guiding them toward the high-but-fulfilling standards God has set.

Resources

[Social Media Contract](#) from Youth Ministry Media

[Social Media Contract](#) for tweens from Very Well

[Bark](#), an app for tracking texting and social media activity

[Circle](#), a device that helps put healthy boundaries on device activity

[Forcefield](#), an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Qustudio](#), an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Screentime](#), an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Connect Safely](#) website

[Protect Young Minds](#) website

[Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey](#)

[The Online Mom](#) website

[U Know Kids](#) website

[Six Ways to Build Your Teen’s Identity](#) from Focus on the Family

[Backwards Beauty: How to Feel Ugly in 10 Simple Steps](#) by Jessie Minassian

[How to Help Our Youth Find Their Identity in Christ](#) from Faith Radio

[Who Do You Think You Are? Developing a Biblically Based Self-Image](#) from jashow.org

[Twelve Ways to Instill Self-Worth in Your Teen](#) from Lifeway

[Parenting the Internet Generation](#) ebook from Covenant Eyes

[“The Challenges of Raising a Digital Native”](#) TedX talk
[Equipped: Raising Godly Digital Natives](#) ebook from Covenant Eyes
[Acknowledging Teens’ Perspectives Leads to Stronger Self-Worth, Less Depression](#) from PsychCentral

We’re creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out axis.org/guides each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.

axis

Social Media Toolkit



INFLUENCERS



70% of teens think that YouTubers are more reliable than celebrities and 88% of consumers trust online recommendations as much as face-to-face recommendations. Social media influencers are real people, and they're more likely to be authentic and to interact with their audience, so brands are starting to take note.

— Influencer Marketing Hub

A Parent's Guide to
INFLUENCERS

Contents

This guide will help you discuss these questions..... 4

Introduction..... 5

What is an influencer? 5

What’s the difference between a celebrity and an influencer? 6

What does the blue check mark mean? 7

Where did influencers come from?..... 7

Why do companies give influencers money?..... 8

Why does my kid want to be an influencer? 8

Is being an influencer as fun and easy as it seems? 8

How do I talk to my teen about this issue? 10

Does Scripture speak to this issue?..... 11

Should we only follow Christian influencers? 12

Has my teen been contacted by sponsors? 12

What do I do if my teen has been contacted?..... 13

Conclusion..... 14

Additional Resources..... 15

A Parent's Guide to
INFLUENCERS

This guide will help you discuss these questions...

- What is an influencer?
- Is being an influencer good or bad?
- What does Scripture say about influencers?
- How do I talk to my teen about influencers?
- What do I do if my teen has been contacted by brands?
- Is it better to follow Christian influencers?
- What do I do if my teen wants to be an influencer?

Introduction

Social media is changing day by day. What started as a way to connect with family and friends and share life has turned into marketing, advertising, and selling products to a larger online community. 95 million photos and videos are posted to Instagram [every day](#). And 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube [every single minute](#). You can get lost down a rabbit trail of endless content that spans everything from funny dog videos to deep posts about religion and philosophy. That's a lot to keep up with—or compete with if you're trying to get your content out there.

If we were to be on social media platforms for only two hours a day, that would tally up to over five years of time over the course of [our lives](#). As of 2019, teens are spending nine hours a day [using media](#). That's more time than they spend sleeping at night. And with people in general spending more time than ever online, brands, movements, and celebrities alike have all realized the power of social media to persuade people to engage in a [desired behavior](#). As a result, a whole new animal has been born: the influencer.

What is an influencer?

Technically, we're all influencers in one way or another, but the term is used specifically to refer to a person who uses their social media presence and platforms to influence others to believe, buy, or do something (or commonly, all three). An influencer ultimately uses their power to market products (their own or someone else's) to their large online following, and by doing so, they also make money, which is why it's now [considered a job](#). Many influencers start out on Instagram or YouTube with a small audience and build it by posting consistently and making connections with their [followers](#). Typically, they make a name for themselves inside a niche and become an authority there.

You'll find influencers in every type of niche. They can build brands around anything—like eating healthy or creating art—and they share their lives with people who are eager to listen. Some examples are:

- Journalists, who travel throughout the country and world, documenting their experiences
- Bloggers, who write about everything from life experiences to reviewing products
- Bookstagrammers, who post photos of their bookshelves, current reads, [and more](#)

- Makeup artists, who post tutorials, share favorite brands, and more
- YouTubers, who create daily content, including vlogs
- Video gamers, who livestream video games and provide commentary as they go through different levels
- Photographers, who post photo shoots, projects, events, and more

In order to grow their platform and reach, influencers are on their social media platforms every day, engaging with their audience, growing relationships, and gaining trust. But for the most part, they don't just do it for fun; they want to monetize their accounts and get paid (e.g., by YouTube for views on their videos and/or by sponsors who pay them to market their products). And companies want to use influencers because they work. When an influencer you trust recommends a product, it feels the same as a friend saying he just discovered the best brand of mac 'n' cheese ever and you need to try it. It's a much more personal feeling than a commercial on TV, a billboard, a spread in a magazine, or a banner on a website.

What's the difference between a celebrity and an influencer?

Companies use influencers because they're not celebrities. People want to see what their peers are using and loving, and give that a try. Unlike celebrities, influencers have built a network of people who know and trust them, people who see them as authority figures and are ready to listen to their advice.

There are differences between them (though these are slowly disappearing), and they typically have to do with how a person became famous. Celebrities are people who achieve stardom for something they do offline (acting, sports, politics, music, etc.), whereas influencers become famous for their online presence. If a celebrity doesn't ever create social media accounts (rare, but it happens), they are still known and have fans, but an influencer's fame depends on—and indeed is built by—their social media presence.

It's important to note that Gen Z prefers influencers over traditional celebrities because of their level of interaction and relatability. Celebrities are often seen as iconic, superior, unrelatable, and “other,” whereas influencers are viewed as more accessible, relatable, approachable, and similar to their followers. As the Influencer Orchestration Network (ION) points out, “Social media influencers inhabit a place between celebrities and friends,” meaning they feel like peers with whom Gen Zers have a relationship, but also like someone they can [aspire to become](#). According to a Google study, “[70% of teenage YouTube subscribers](#) say they relate to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities,” and ION says that “social media creators get 12 times the number of comments that a

traditional celebrity does.”

It's also important to note that celebrities and influencers are not mutually exclusive; influencers can become celebrities, and celebrities can become influencers—or it may be impossible to tell which one they were first (e.g., the Kardashians). In fact, nowadays people often become celebrities only because they already have a large online presence. Media companies tend to choose to hire the singers/actors/athletes who will bring fans with them over the ones who are virtually unknown. For this reason, many people feel the need to begin cultivating their “brand” or persona at younger and younger ages.

What does the blue check mark mean?

It lets people know you're legit. Officially, it's called being “verified,” and platforms use it to denote that you are who you say you are. They only do this for the accounts of celebrities, large brands, and influencers who have a large enough following (though the threshold for a check mark is not disclosed by the platforms). For more details on what the check mark means on different platforms—such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok—visit their websites.

Where did influencers come from?

Advertising and marketing have changed significantly over the past few hundred years, with influencers slowly emerging thanks to the Internet, social media, and the need for companies to find ways around ad-blocking software (which targets [traditional online banner ads](#)). Combined with new abilities to harness word of mouth (which can lead to content “going viral”), marketers realized that younger generations trust product endorsements by people they feel as if they know (influencers) more than they trust them from people who feel separate and different (celebrities).

In addition, average everyday people realized that social media had effectively democratized fame, taking the power away from large corporations and media conglomerates and putting it in their hands. Anyone who wanted to get famous could do so simply by utilizing the power of social media. So more and more people started blogging, vlogging, making tutorial videos, putting their music online, and more in an attempt to gain followers and attract advertisers. For more on this, check out this fascinating [article](#).

Why do companies give influencers money?

Companies love influencers because they introduce products directly to the customers. An influencer may have fewer followers than a celebrity, but their audience is engaged and invested. One Forbes article explains that using influencers in marketing strategies costs a lot less than contracting big names (celebrities). And much like established public figures, influencers can introduce the product directly to a company's desired audience. But because it can be cheaper to use influencer marketing, companies can hire multiple influencers "for [a] [fraction of the cost](#) of a big name."

When you see an ad pop up in the middle of a YouTube video, you might tune out or skip ahead, but influencers use their personal connections to make you want what they're selling. Instead of just putting a commercial in front of you, they weave products into their regular content. Because they're making real connections with people online, followers trust their recommendations. We trust the opinions of our friends, and companies trust the abilities of influencers to turn friends and followers into customers.

Why does my kid want to be an influencer?

From the outside, being an influencer looks like a fun job. You become an authority on a topic you're passionate about and inspire others who want to follow in your footsteps. Influencers' feeds are aesthetic, their content is well thought out, and their posts can be insightful, fun, and humorous. One of the most attractive parts of being an influencer is the idea of getting paid to "live your best life" and do what you most want to be doing—traveling around the world like the [Bucket List Family](#), sharing fashion hacks like [Hilary Rushford](#), even playing video games like [Ninja](#). Pretty enticing, right? Especially to a teenager who already spends a ton of time on social media and thinks that "traditional" jobs are the worst thing ever. But, as we'll discuss below, being an influencer has its downsides, some of which might be worse than the drawbacks of other jobs.

Is being an influencer as fun and easy as it seems?

Since influencers as we know them today wouldn't exist without social media, it follows that all the problems related to social media—obsession with image; comparison; preoccupation with likes, follows, and unfollows; number of views; time spent online; etc.—are there for influencers. But because everything they do is focused on social media, they may experience these problems on steroids. If your teenager wants to become an influencer, ask him to think about this: If he faces pressure to curate a certain image or interact a certain amount or post often enough or look a certain way now, how much more so will those pressures increase if he tries to make a livelihood off of social media?

One of the reasons fans often prefer content from an influencer instead of a traditional celebrity is because the layers of separation that exist between them and the celebrity are essentially stripped away with an influencer. There's no more mystery, no need for paparazzi to follow them around to find out even the tiniest detail of their personal lives. Instead, most influencers willingly share these details in an effort to become more relatable. Plus, followers tend to think that because they've faithfully followed someone and essentially helped propel them to fame, the influencer "owes" them things, like content every so often or personal glimpses of their lives.

One of two things typically happens to influencers. They either feel they can never turn the camera off and just relax and be themselves—they must always be on and ready to share their lives with the Internet—or they become less and less authentic as they create a persona to share online in an attempt to keep some semblance of privacy. Neither of these are good, but they nonetheless happen because fans expect influencers to interact and be willing to show their lives, much more than they expect the same of celebrities.

These issues lead to another problem that's not obvious at first glance. What we see when an influencer posts an image or a video or other types of content is simply what they post. What we don't see is how long it takes them to create that content. So a teenager might think, Great, a post plus a story or two on Instagram a day, a video on YouTube a day . . . easy! I can do that no problem. But as some influencers are making more apparent (including YouTuber Jake Paul after vlogging for [500 consecutive days](#)), it takes a ton of time to make, say, a five-minute YouTube video or to get the perfect shot and write the perfect caption for an Instagram post. When your job becomes a 24-7 responsibility with no time off ever, that can lead to burnout and exhaustion very quickly. But it doesn't have to be that way. It's possible to set realistic expectations for followers early on by telling them when and how often to expect content, though posting less frequently typically leads to slower growth and monetization.

Beyond what we've already discussed, influencers also face pressure to conform to a certain image because their fans want it or because sponsors threaten to revoke their endorsements. There's also the fact that the Internet can be a very cruel place. Anyone who is a public figure online is under constant scrutiny, with people waiting to pounce on anything that could potentially be controversial (one example is [#CancelJames](#), a feud between YouTubers [James Charles and Tati Westbrook](#)). Teens might feel pressure to pose in certain ways or in certain levels of undress ("Everyone else does it!"), or their newfound fame might open up access to drugs and alcohol. There's the possibility that your teen could be contacted by other famous people (as one teen was when she became famous [virtually overnight](#)), and you wouldn't know about it or be able to stop it. "Managers" and "agents" who claim to want to represent your child may not have the best of intentions. None of this even begins to speak to the fact that teenagers are at a time when they're trying to figure out who they are, what they want, and what they stand for, so building a brand around something that could change a lot isn't always a good idea. The list goes on and on.

One of our staff at Axis remembers her mom always saying that she wouldn't wish fame

on anyone. Though it didn't make sense to her teenage brain at the time, she now realizes that her mom was referring to all the pressure that came along with being famous. And it's only getting worse. If your teenager aspires to become an influencer, all of these things are worth discussing at length so they have a better idea of what they're getting themselves into.

How do I talk to my teen about this issue?

Whether you're in favor of influencer marketing or not, you can and should converse with your kids about the influencer phenomenon in order to guide them toward wisdom and flourishing. Start by simply asking what influencers your teen has noticed on social media. Since teens are so involved on sites like Instagram and YouTube, a lot of their interests and ideas may be coming from influencers. By asking a nonthreatening question, you'll avoid putting them on the defensive. Take time to check out these influencers' profiles with your teen. This can help them to open up and share about who they're following. It can also give you insight into the world of influencers and the types of people your teen looks up to on social media.

Next, rather than just telling them what you think, it's important to ask questions that get them thinking. Some helpful questions include:

- What influencers do you follow? Why do you like to follow them?
- What makes this person qualified to give advice in this (or any) area?
- Do you know how they became an influencer? Does that make you trust them more or less?
- Is following them good for you?
- Is the influencer lifestyle really as great as it seems? How do you know?
- How can you be a positive influence on the people around you, whether that's online or in the real world?
- Is there a line you're not willing to cross in order to build your brand or make money? What is that line? How did you decide to put it there?
- How do you define success? What would it take for you to consider yourself successful?
- Is that different from how God's defines success? If so, how?
- How could you use your "brand" as a way to reach God's version of success?
- If you became an influencer, how would you want to influence your followers?
- How would you use your influence to help others, glorify God, and bring true beauty

to the world?

Does Scripture speak to this issue?

Does it speak specifically about our modern iteration of what it means to “follow” someone or be an influencer? No, but as there’s [“nothing new under the sun,”](#) there’s a lot we can learn from God’s Word.

When we look at the stories told throughout Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings, we get a clear picture of how powerful influence can be. Before the time of the judges, Joshua had been a leader for the Israelites, one who devoted himself to following the Lord, obeying His commands, and not allowing himself to be influenced by the surrounding cultures. During his leadership, the Israelites also followed God, but after he died, the Israelites slowly forgot about all that God had done for them (rescued them from Egypt, lead them through the wilderness to the Promised Land, etc.), and they “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (Judges 3:7). Scripture tells us that God’s anger burned against them, so He allowed their enemies to prevail. Eventually, they cried out to Him for deliverance, and He provided a judge to lead them in battle. For a time, they followed God again. But time and time again, they strayed, needed rescuing, cried out to God, were given a leader, returned to God, then strayed again.

As [this video](#) points out, the many judges who ruled over the Israelites during this time varied in their devotion to God.²¹ And it’s clear that the worse the ruler was, the more God’s people strayed. Their influence made a tremendous difference. What’s also worth noting is that, after a while, the Israelites got even more whiny, asking God why the other nations had kings and they didn’t. God told Samuel that the people were not rejecting Samuel by asking for a king—they were rejecting God as their ultimate King (1 Samuel 8:4-9). In God’s good design, He was the Israelites’ leader—their influencer—and they were His special people, set apart for His glory. Instead of embracing their identity, the Israelites looked at what everyone else had and wanted that instead. They were discontent because they thought others had it better.

There are many levels of influence, both good and bad, to analyze here, but what’s quite clear is that no one should have more influence on what we love, desire, pursue, hope for, and believe than God Himself. If anyone else holds this power in our lives, we will be led astray. In addition, these Old Testament records illuminate just how much responsibility and power a leader or influencer has. It’s no small task to be in such a position, and we are responsible for how we guide, teach, and influence others (James 3:1).

Other parts of Scripture worth examining with your teen include:

- Jesus guiding His disciples (Mark 9:35)
- Paul shepherding different communities of believers (1 Corinthians 10:23-29; Philippians 1:27-30)

- The serpent's influence over Adam and Eve (Genesis 3)
- Naomi's influence over Ruth (Ruth 1:16-17)
- Proverbs 13:20 and Proverbs 27:17
- 1 Corinthians 15:33

Should we only follow Christian influencers?

Honestly, no. Both Christian and non-Christian influencers can create great content, but the opposite is also true: both can create terrible content. Following influencers comes with positives and negatives, whether they're Christians or not. And just because an influencer calls themselves a Christian doesn't mean their content will actually be Christ-honoring or true. In fact, the Bible tells us to be wary of false teachers who disguise themselves (Matthew 7:15-20). Plus, within the Christian community there are so many different doctrines and beliefs that simply calling oneself a Christian doesn't tell us where someone stands on certain issues, let alone how they feel about promoting something simply to get a paycheck.

Ultimately, we should use discernment when deciding whom to follow, no matter who they say they are. Outward appearances may be deceiving, and God tells us that He looks deeper than what we see on the surface (1 Samuel 16:7). In a world where people can so easily masquerade as anything they want, discernment is necessary.

In addition to this, we also need to be aware that even Christian influencers might promote things we don't need, because a brand is paying them to advertise. Not everything an influencer tells us to buy is something we need to have in our lives, nor should we value an influencer's opinion if it only increases our greed or dissatisfaction.

If we're unsure, we need to ask God to give us wisdom and discernment, as well as the strength to make the right choice. Sometimes we love things more than we love God, so even if they're not inherently bad, we allow them to take a place in our lives that is meant only for God . . . and we have to give them up. But that can be extremely hard to do. So we need to ask God for His strength and determination to follow through—and we must teach our teens to do the same.

Has my teen been contacted by sponsors?

Actually, it's possible they have been. Brands love what they call "nanoinfluencers," or accounts that are pretty influential in a very small community and are willing to do sponsored posts for around \$50 (typically [younger teens](#)). Companies are starting to utilize these nanoinfluencers because they have the time on their hands to make creative posts that don't look like ads, they cost a fraction of most other ads, and they

cost a fraction of most other ads, and they get pretty good results. So if your teen fits that bill, it's quite possible a brand has DMed (direct messaged) them asking if they'd like to "collaborate."

What do I do if my teen has been contacted?

Regardless of whether you decide it's smart for your teen to engage in this activity, it's important to talk to them about it. Anyone at any time can attempt to DM your child, even if their account is private. So if you never talk to them about it, they won't have your wisdom to guide them when it does happen. Ask your teen if they or their friends have ever been contacted by someone to do sponsored posts. What did they do? Do they wish they could do sponsored posts? Why or why not? Are they aware of the laws governing [sponsored posts](#)? What would they do if someone wanted them to post something without disclosing that it was sponsored?

If, after lots of prayerful consideration, you do decide it makes sense for your teen and your family to do sponsored posts, it's important to set up boundaries and guidelines to protect your teenager. Make sure they know these guidelines, are willing to follow them, and understand that being an influencer is a privilege that can be revoked if they abuse it.

It's also important to vet brands and companies that contact your teen. Some are legitimate; others may not have good track records of actually paying or disclosing when their posts are sponsored. We encourage you to research the company reaching out to your teen and find out all the specifics included in doing a sponsored post before making a decision.

Some pros of doing sponsored posts are:

1. The ability to make money in a field you're passionate about. Not everyone gets a chance to do what they love, and being able to make an income from sharing your life experiences with the world is a huge plus for a lot of people. You can also partner with brands you love, people you're excited to root for, and products that have changed your life.
2. Exposure for brands and companies that are doing good in the world. Some companies are working toward a better, cleaner, happier environment and are doing good by donating proceeds, among other things. Working alongside a company that provides clean water in other countries, for instance, can go a long way to enhance other people's lives.

Some cons are:

1. Creating posts or an online persona simply for the sake of popularity. It's a trap we can all fall into if we're not careful, and even doing a sponsored post can be inauthentic if the product is not something you actually support or use. One goal of sponsored

posts and ads is to let our followers know that we're working with a brand. But if we're not clear about it, we can give off the wrong impression. That's why the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has come up with ways for paid content to be clearly marked, as described in [this article](#).

2. Overanalyzing every post and its reception from your followers by counting likes. Teens spend hours a day on social media platforms, which include sites like Instagram and YouTube. With that much time scrolling through and posting content, teens can become pretty enamored with things happening in the online world.

3. People who might try to take advantage. Not only are certain brands and companies unethical, but as we mentioned previously, some unscrupulous people might try to offer their services as agents or managers for your teen. People like these are only there to prey on the vulnerable and take what they can for themselves.

Conclusion

Influence is not a new concept—in fact, it's been around since the beginning of time. But it's never been so monetized or so tangible as it is in today's world. So even if your teenager never becomes famous or an influencer, there will always be people around them whom they can influence, for good or for evil. Whether they're online or in person, with a large audience or a small group of friends, you can encourage your teen to be a positive voice in their community and live a life of authenticity. While becoming an influencer is not inherently bad, it does come with a lot of risks and stressors, all things about which your teenager needs your guidance, wisdom, and, yes, sometimes even your protection.

Isn't that exactly what it means to be a parent? Yes, we're caretakers and providers and authorities and chauffeurs and cooks and cleaners and coaches and mentors and many other roles. But what it all boils down to is that we're the biggest influencers in our kids' lives. May we use our influence to point our kids toward flourishing, love, kindness, goodness, beauty, and, above all, Christ.

Additional Resources

- “Rising Instagram Stars Are Posting Fake Sponsored Content,” The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/influencers-are-faking-brand-deals/578401/>
- “Understanding Influencer Marketing and Why It Is So Effective,” Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2018/07/30/understanding-influencer-marketing-and-why-it-is-so-effective/?sh=395644f671a9>
- “Cameo, the Celebrity Shout-Out Startup, Nears \$300M Valuation,” The Hustle: <https://thehustle.co/Cameo-startup-celebrity-shout-outs/>
- “The Increasing Allure of Being an Influencer in College,” Fashionista: <https://fashionista.com/2019/05/college-influencers-brand-ambassadors>
- “For Brands of All Shapes and Sizes, Influencer Marketing Is a Serious Bet,” Quartz: <https://qz.com/1630285/how-brands-use-social-media-influencers-for-marketing/>
- In the Dust of the Rabbi: Five Lessons on Learning to Live as Jesus Lived, Ray Vander Laan: <https://www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/in-the-dust-of-the-rabbi>
- Check out axis.org for more resources, including The Culture Translator, a free weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related.