

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**

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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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