

Social Media: What Parents Need to Know

Social media is more than just Facebook and Instagram. According to Oxford Dictionary, social media is defined as “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”. There are thousands of online platforms that allow for information sharing among users. YouTube (85%), Instagram (72%) and Snapchat (69%) are the most popular online platforms used by U.S. teens ages 13-17, followed by Facebook (51%), Twitter (32%), Tumblr (9%) and Reddit (7%) (PEW Research). PEW also found that in 2018, 95% of teens reported they have access to a smart phone, up from the 73% of teens who reported having access to a smartphone in 2014-2015 (PEW Research). With the rise in the number of teens that own or have access to a smart phone, it is more important than ever for parents to be aware of social media trends and ways to keep their child safe online.

Here are the apps we are hearing the most about:

YouTube, not to be confused with YouTube Kids intended for kids under the age of 12, provides access to videos from all over the world with a variety of content. With hundreds of videos uploaded every minute, youth can easily spend hours watching videos. YouTube suggests videos based on your recent searches and a new video automatically begins to play when the one before it ends, which can make it easy to lose track of time and difficult to put down. In order to be compliant with new guidelines set by the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), YouTube now requires users to identify if their video is appropriate for children or not. (Additional information on new regulations found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CzTAeLNRbg>). The new parameters are a step in the right direction, but parents still need to be cautious of adult content on YouTube. There may still be videos that look like they are for youth, like cartoons, but the subject matter is in fact inappropriate for youth.



Snapchat is an app in which users take and send a “snap” to other users and the snap will disappear after a brief period of time, typically a few seconds. A snap is commonly a photo with or without a caption, but can also be a message or video. Users can also create “stories”, which is a series of photos and videos. Users can subscribe to accounts to view public stories as they are posted. When users send snaps back and forth, a snapstreak begins. Snapchat rewards users with emojis the longer the streak continues. Teens have reported that they feel like they are being a good friend by keeping the streak going or that they feel popular for having streaks with multiple people. They put a significant amount of pressure on themselves to keep streaks going by asking friends to log into their account to keep the streak going when they don’t have access to their phone (Business Insider). For some students, particularly those that have an existing mental health concern, this can trigger anxiety or stress. Snapchat does not have parental controls that are easy to navigate. In fact, most of the settings can be changed back. Here is a step by step guide to help you adjust settings in Snapchat: <https://protectyoungeyes.com/apps/snapchat-parental-controls/>

YOLO: Q&A is a Snapchat add-on app that allows users to send and receive anonymous questions and answers from other Snapchat users. YOLO first hit the market in 2019 and is currently one of the top free apps in the Apple store. Apple gave YOLO a 17+ age rating, but with the popularity of Snapchat among teens, it is likely they are also taking an interest in this add on app as well. Note that a rating is only a recommendation; it does not prevent users from downloading and using the app. The potential for bullying is very high with this app because of the anonymous sharing. Parents have stated that soon after downloading the app, children receive hateful messages and sexually suggestive comments (commonsensemedia.org). If your child is going to use this app, make sure that their account settings are set to private.

TikTok (formerly called musical.ly) is an app for users to generate and post music videos. Users can utilize filters and effects within the app and can even edit videos. There are several different types of videos from Memes, Comedy and Sports to Food and Pets. Kids find the app entertaining. Many users report that it can be easy to lose track of time. They like that the videos are short and they can message other users, which cannot be done on YouTube. Videos may have sexual content or swearing, making them inappropriate for young kids. Due to a settlement that was finalized in 2019, users under 13 now have their own section for video viewing. Parents still need to talk to their child about appropriate use and to report bullying.

Social Media is not inherently bad, but without educating youth on how to properly use social media there will be greater instances of risky behavior. For example, numerous challenges have circulated online that have caught the attention of youth. The latest challenge circulating on TikTok is the “skull breaker challenge” or the “tripping challenge”, in which three people plan to jump in the air at the same time, but instead the two on the outside kick the legs out from under the middle person. This challenge, like others (Tide Pod Challenge, choking game, Momo challenge etc.), easily gain popularity online through social media. Teens have a tendency to experiment and take risks. Social media has just provided a place for bad ideas to catch on and tempt adventurous youth at a greater rate than before through social media. It is important to have regular conversations with youth about how to be safe online and the consequences that their online behavior can have.

Tips for parents:

- Know what your child is using. If you do not know how an app works, download it and learn how to use it.
- Approve apps before your child downloads them. You can have your child use your app store or account to download apps, so that they must be approved by you before they are downloaded.
- Engage in conversations about trending apps. Youth trends are always changing, one of the best ways to stay up-to-date is to ask youth what they are into.
- Recognize the warning signs. If social media begins to impact your child’s life in a negative way (decline in grades, lack of sleep, withdrawal from activities etc.), it may be time to seek help.
- Discuss appropriate communication online. Help them understand the consequences of their actions online.
- Get youth to think about consequences of their actions by talking about online challenges and risky behaviors. Ask them whether they think the challenge is safe or dangerous.

Resources:

Set up Parental Controls on iPhone, iPad, and iPod: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201304>

Set up Parental Controls on Android tablets and phones:

<https://support.google.com/googleplay/answer/1075738?hl=en>

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