

Digital Guardians

**A Guide to Navigating
Social Media and Online
Safety with Your Child**



Introduction

With technology companies prioritizing profits over accountability, families are left to navigate the digital world without adequate safeguards to protect children. Parents face challenges ranging from cyberbullying to virtual “stranger danger,” and it’s easy to feel powerless in the face of these threats. But you don’t need to be a tech expert to foster safer online habits for your family.

But, with the right tools and resources, you can stay connected, support your child’s digital journey, and create a safer, healthier online environment together. Inside this toolkit, you’ll find practical advice, tips and tricks from actual parents, and resources to help you guide your children toward safe and responsible social media use.



What Is Social Media?

Websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information, opinions, pictures, videos, etc. on the internet, especially social networking websites.



Popular Platforms

The digital landscape offers countless platforms that captivate children and teens by blending creativity, connection, and entertainment.

Research shows that, in 2024:

The most widely used apps/programs were:

- YouTube (90% of teens report using the site.)
- TikTok* (60% of teens report using the site)
- Instagram (60% of teens report using the site)
- Snapchat (55% of teens report using the site)

Less popular apps/programs

- Facebook (32% of teens use the platform)
- WhatsApp (23% use it, up from 17% in 2022)
- X (17% of teens use it)

Nearly all U.S. teens say they use the internet every day (96%). And the share of teens who report being online “almost constantly” has roughly doubled since 2014-2015 (24% vs 46%).

- Pew Research Center

*At the time of publishing, TikTok was still available in the U.S.

SO, WHAT'S THE APPEAL?

What makes these apps so irresistible
to children and teens?



YouTube: A platform for tutorials, entertainment and user-generated videos; endless variety, from gaming streams to educational videos.



TikTok: Highly addictive, short-form videos, TikTok is a hub for creativity, humor, challenges and trends.



Instagram: Users share photos, videos, and stories while interacting through likes, comments and direct messages; allows kids and teens to showcase their lives, explore interests, and engage with peers.



Snapchat: Loved for its disappearing messages and fun filters, Snapchat encourages spontaneous sharing.



WhatsApp: A messaging app that allows kids and teens to communicate through text, voice and video calls in private or group chats; it's simple, private and has international reach.



Roblox: A gaming platform and virtual universe where kids can create, play, and socialize, with endless user-generated games and interactive features.



BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

There are positives to social media, and children and teens have found benefits to having an online presence. When used responsibly and under proper guidance, these platforms can provide opportunities for growth, connection, and learning, including:

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Kids are able to stay in touch with friends, especially those that live far away. It can also help shy or introverted teens build relationships in a way that feels less intimidating than in-person interactions.



ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY

Social media provides tools and outlets for creative expression, whether through videos, art, music, writing, or photography. Kids and teens use platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram for inspiration and to showcase their talents.



DEVELOPING DIGITAL SKILLS

Navigating social media can teach teens valuable skills, such as video editing, graphic design, content creation, and online communication - abilities that can be useful in school and future careers.



LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Teens can use social media to stay informed about news, trends, and educational topics. They can also join groups or follow accounts that provide tutorials, career advice, or guidance on personal interests.



STRENGTHENING FAMILY BONDS

Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp can help kids and teens stay connected with extended family members who live far away, creating stronger bonds across distances.

RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Technology is constantly evolving, and so are the risks associated with it. Socializing online can help kids connect with others, but teaching them how to safely navigate these spaces becomes more important every day.

IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Emphasis on likes and followers, as well as constant exposure to curated images can lead to comparison, insecurity, feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and depression.



EXPOSURE TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Children may encounter violent, sexual, or otherwise age-inappropriate material, even on platforms intended for children, or with content moderation. Harmful trends or challenges on platforms like TikTok can encourage risky behaviors.



SUBSCRIBE

ONLINE PREDATORS/ PRIVACY CONCERNS

Predators may use social media to gain the trust of children and teens, and platforms with direct messaging or chat features can be avenues for grooming. Teens may overshare personal information without understanding the risks, and poor data security on some platforms can expose sensitive information to strangers.



ADDICTIVE DESIGN / SCAMS/EXPLOITATION

Teens can use social media to stay informed about news, trends, and educational topics. They can also join groups or follow accounts that provide tutorials, career advice, or guidance on personal interests.



CYBERBULLYING

Social media provides a platform for harassment, shaming, and spreading rumors, often anonymously. Victims of cyberbullying can experience anxiety, depression, and a decline in self-esteem. Kids may also find themselves pressured into risky activities they wouldn't normally consider.



Children and teens learn a lot just by observing the adults in their lives, including how to use social media and how to interact online.

When it comes to having conversations with our kids, the first place to start is by looking at your own online activity.

Ask Yourself

How much time do you spend on your phone, on social media, or on a gaming platform each day?



Interacting Online

By modeling the behavior you want your kids to adopt, you can reinforce healthy digital habits and demonstrate responsible online conduct.

- **Be Mindful of Your Own Screen Time:**
Balance screen time with offline time practicing moderation and being fully present.
- **Maintain a Positive Online Presence:**
Post respectfully and thoughtfully on your own accounts, and avoid sharing overly personal content or engaging in arguments online.
- **Practice Privacy and Security:**
Explain the importance of keeping personal information safe, and discuss the steps you take so they understand how to protect themselves.
- **Address Mistakes Openly:**
If you make an error online, such as sharing something you later regret, use it as an opportunity to discuss how to handle similar situations.
- **Respect Boundaries**
Avoid oversharing about your children online; Model respect by asking their consent before sharing anything that involves them.

Examples of How to Address Social Media Use (by age group)

Young Children (5-9)

- **Keep it Simple:**
Use age-appropriate language, like, “Not everything on the internet is true.”
- **Teach Basics:**
Explain why they should never share their name or where they live.

VS.

Tweens (10-12)

- **Have Open Conversations:**
Ask questions like, “Have you ever seen anything online that made you uncomfortable?”
- **Talk About Privacy:**
Explain privacy settings and teach them to think twice before posting.
- **Discuss Online Etiquette:**
Reinforce the importance of treating people with respect

VS.

Teens (13+)

- **Focus on Trust:**
Make sure they are comfortable talking about their experiences without fear of punishment.
- **Mental Health:**
Encourage them to take breaks and prioritize real-life connections.
- **Empower Independence:**
Teach them how to find truth and be safe.

The best way to help your kids navigate social media is by using open and honest communication. As parents, we know that how you approach a subject will vary depending on the age of your kids, and often they will be very different conversations. Tailoring your approach based on their age and maturity level ensures that the conversation is age-appropriate and effective.



While social media offers opportunities for learning and connection, there are still challenges.

What can parents do to help their children develop positive and responsible digital habits while reducing potential risks?



Practical Tips for Safe Social Media Use

- Privacy Settings Are Your First Line of Defense
 - Go through privacy settings together on each platform
 - Set accounts to private and limit visibility to approved friends or followers.
- Pause Before Posting
 - Encourage children of all ages to ask themselves before they post: “Is this post kind?” and “Could this be misunderstood or harm someone?”
- Addressing Cyberbullying
 - Teach children of all ages how to:
 - Block users who make them uncomfortable
 - Report harmful content to platform moderators.
 - Talk to you or a trusted adult immediately.

Parental Control Apps

Interacting Online

As parents, we know we can't always be with our kids, but there are ways to keep them as safe as possible online. Tools are available to reduce risks with features like monitoring, setting time limits, blocking content, and disabling the ability to make purchases. Here are some of the top-rated apps out there.



Qustodio - Filter content and apps, monitor activity, set time limits and routines, track calls and texts, and track your kids location. Available for iOS, Android, Windows, Mac, Chromebook and Kindle.



Aura - Filter, block, and monitor websites and apps, set custom time limits for each child, and pause internet use. Available for iOS and Android phones and tablets, and Windows PCs.



Bark US - Monitor text messages, 30+ social media apps, web browsers, emails, and other online activity. Or, use the Bark phone plan and give your kid a phone with parental controls already installed.



mSPY - See all activities on iOS and Android phones and tablets, and Windows and Mac computers. Operates invisibly in the background.



Norton Family - See search history, viewed videos, monitor for inappropriate content, set time limits, and track locations. Available for iOS and Android devices, and Windows and Mac computers.





Conversation Starters

No one knows better than you how best to talk about hard things with your kids. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, conversations about online safety will likely happen more often than ever. That said, it can be hard to know where to start.

Here are some ideas to help you get started!

Conversation Starters (by age group)

Young Children (5-9)

- What do you think people use the internet for?
- Why do you think it's important to keep some information private?
- If someone said something mean online, what do you think you should do?
- When you're with friends, if they're on their phones instead of talking to each other, how does that feel?

VS.

Tweens (10-12)

- Are there times of the day that you think we should not use our phones?
- If you left your phone at home by accident, how do you think you would feel? Why?
- Have you noticed times when it's harder to get off video games?
- Do you feel like people are being real on social media? How can you tell if they are?
- Have you ever seen something online that made you uncomfortable? How did you handle it?
- What would you do if someone you didn't know tried to message you?

VS.

Teens (13+)

- Do you feel like people are being real on social media? How can you tell if they are?
- When you're hanging out with friends, and they're all on their phones and not paying attention to each other, how does that feel?
- If you left your phone at home by accident, how do you think you would feel? Why?
- What do you do when you see something mean or hurtful online?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable about something you saw or shared online?

**So you tried to talk
to your child and it
didn't go well ...**

Now what?



- It's okay not to “win” an argument right at that moment.
- Take a deep breath. Remember that you have more experience feeling big things. If you're frustrated, they probably are too.
- Take a 15 minute “cool down” break, and then come back together to try again.

WARNING



The content beyond this point includes topics that may be sensitive. Readers are advised to proceed with care and prioritize their mental health. If you feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable at any time, consider taking a break or seeking support from a trusted individual or professional.

Subjects include:

Cyberbullying

Self-Harm

Suicide/Suicidal Ideations

Mental Health

Resource Page

