PARENTS' GUIDE TO
SOCIAL MEDIA

Contents

A life lived online

Social media presents many fears for parents of teenagers. A straw poll of parents using schoolreviewer.co.uk highlights a common list of concerns. Parents fear their children will be:

- groomed or stalked by predators [1]
- bullied
- endangered by the erosion of their privacy
- vulnerable to seeing or seeking out inappropriate content
- addicted to checking their social media accounts [2]
- foolish online, harming their long-term career prospects

> " Unless you talk to my mother, the majority of my teenage stupid has disappeared from the world. Now teenage stupid is forever. I really worry for some young people that their chances of being taken seriously in workplaces will be materially harmed by some of the things they post on social media, especially if they become public figures."

The lower age limit for most social media sites is 13, but many parents will be familiar with the peer group pressure to join these sites at a much earlier age (it is usually easy to get around the rules simply by lying about your age). The NSPCC reports that one in five eight-to-11-year-olds has a social media profile. Seven in 10 children aged 12-15 have one.

1. Concerns that social media can be used by predators to target young people are often fuelled by media coverage of offences of online grooming, but the NSPCC points out that 90% (?) of abusers are people the child knows in their day-to-day life.

2. Research has indicated that teenagers with high levels of social media use are more prone to depression, poor sleep and anxiety.

How this guide can help

This guide will give an overview of the major social media platforms to help you understand the risks and offer some useful tips.

Social media is always changing. We will endeavour to review and update this guide, and articles on emerging social media platforms are regularly posted on the schoolreviewer.co.uk website – do subscribe for updates.

The key thing to remember is that you don't have to become a social media ninja to protect your child. Most of the experts in this field are clear that it is too demanding a challenge for parents to keep on top of every social media platform their child might use – Wikipedia lists 211 of them!

By teaching some of the basic principles outlined in the later in this guide, you can equip your child with the skills needed to navigate the unfamiliar online world safely and encourage a respectful ongoing dialogue in which you learn from each other.

> " It's hard when you want to be a helicopter parent, hovering over your child to ensure their safety! I've tried to show them trust – to warn them of the important principles, but to avoid snooping on them, eavesdropping on their conversations with friends and checking up on everything they do online. It seems to have worked, but every parent knows their own child best and I understand how others might be less confident with such a laissez-faire approach."

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Facebook

With over 1.65 billion monthly active users, Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the world and it is the one we inevitably will spend most time exploring – many of the principles discussed here will be relevant to other platforms. Facebook encourages live chatting between friends – though chat history can be deleted. It can be used to share achievements, to plan social events and for friends to wish each other happy birthday. At its best, it can be a positive force in your child's life – but there are risks. Facebook offers its own useful guidance to parents on how to address safety issues.

Technically users have to be aged 13 or older to set up a profile but it is very easy to input a fake date of birth to get around that rule.Users can post photos, links, videos and simple status updates. Depending on your child's privacy settings, these can be seen only by friends (these can be divided into subsets for individual posts, which means that even if you and your child are friends on Facebook you may not see all their posts) or by the wider public, who can react by clicking a thumbs-up symbol or adding emoticons (animated faces that express emotions like laughter and irritation).

The audience can add comments and can share your child's posts with their friends or to the general public. This means your child should never assume their posts are restricted purely to their immediate friends – an incentive not to post something they would be embarrassed about later if others see it. Posts from friends appear in what is called a news feed – simply a long stream of messages and pictures. Your own posts appear in what is called a timeline.
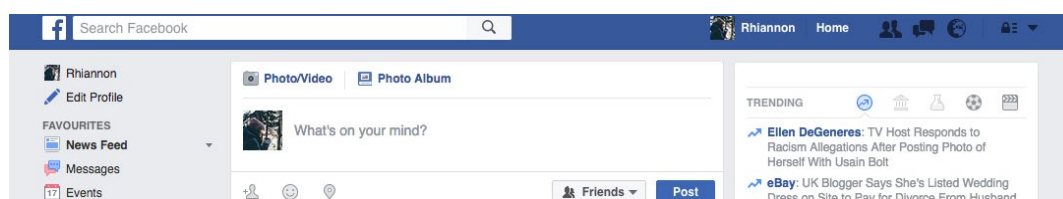

Facebook post's appear in what is known as a timeline

Images: Facebook

Privacy

Facebook privacy settings change all the time and many people complain that in the past Facebook has been poor at alerting users to these changes. On the positive side, it has a handy check-up facility that can be accessed through the padlock icon at the right of the top menu bar. This gives you an overview of how private a profile is and information on how to block nuisance users.

Help your child to set up sensible privacy settings – for instance, ensuring that postings are only shared with friends, rather than the public at large. Review these privacy settings regularly.
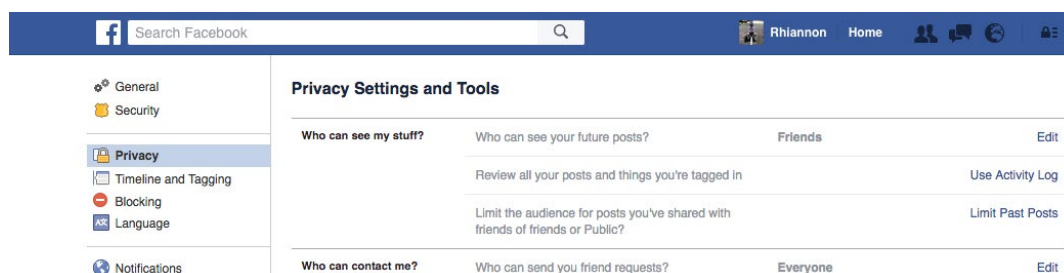
Facebook's privacy settings tool

Friends

If they are restricting posts to friends, it is important that your child doesn't befriend or accept friend requests from people they don't know. It is easy for people to befriend them without being honest about who they are.They can unfriend people if they fall out. They can also unfollow so that they don't see that person's posts on their news feed.

Personal details

Facebook offers your child the opportunity to share information about themselves, including the schools they have attended, where they live, their phone number, email and address.

These personal details can be used by those pretending to know them – or to be friends of friends – for grooming purposes. Arguably, there is little reason for including these details in a Facebook profile. (Parents may also want to review the settings on their own account, especially if they are sharing photos of their children – for instance, in a recognisable school uniform.)

Be aware that inappropriate content liked or commented on can show up in a public arena and there are no parental controls to avoid this. However, if your privacy settings are correct, only your friends will see your posts. If any of these friends choose to share your posts, only your mutual friends – those you originally selected to share with – will see the share.

The privacy issues around tagging may be more complicated than you think

Tagging

It is very likely your child will be photographed with groups of friends and these photos will be posted and shared without their permission.

Facebook allows tagging – so, for instance, a child may post a photo of themselves with your daughter and the tag "Playing in the park with Emma Jones." At this point all your daughter's friends will be able to see this picture.Beware, you may fall for this one too! If you post a photo of your son getting his GCSE results with a "So proud of Jimmy Smith – 6As!" comment, your friends and family will see it. But so will all of Jimmy's friends.

It is possible to set a privacy level where your child has to be asked before they can be tagged in a post, but given the volume of sharing that goes on, many children will disable this. And it doesn't get around the posting of pictures that are untagged. It may actually be better for them to see what people are posting about them. Good friendship groups can establish some internal rules about posting pictures on Facebook and it is worth encouraging your child to discuss the issue with their friends.

One of the big risks with Facebook is posting content you come to regret later. The Government recently launched a campaign on cleaning up your profile so that future prospective employers don't get the wrong impression of you – another reason for applying strict privacy settings.

Many adults – including the elderly – are now adopting Facebook. Some of them set bad examples by becoming hooked on the number of "likes" they receive, while others fail to appreciate that what they post or share online can also have consequences for their children. By asking your child considerate questions – for example, "Would you mind me posting this picture of you?" – you can foster more thoughtful Facebook use both in yourself and in them.

The increased use of Facebook among adults also means teenagers looking for privacy from their family and for something more attuned to their generation are turning to other platforms.

"My friend's grandmother sent her a message on Valentine's day that included a tag reading: 'Happy Valentine's day, love Nanna xxx.' She got ridiculed all day at school for it. Everyone has an embarrassing Grandma Facebook story!"

Instagram

Instagram, which has 500 million monthly users worldwide, is similar to Facebook but is centred around images. The minimum official age for using Instagram is 13. Your child can post photos and videos of up to 60 seconds in length with a small caption. People can then comment on these images and like them (with a heart symbol, rather than the Facebook thumbs-up). Instagram also allows them to share content they have posted on other platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, but they should be aware that if they post something on Instagram, share it on other platforms and then delete it on Instagram it won't be automatically deleted from any of the other platforms. Direct messaging allows private contact with other users.
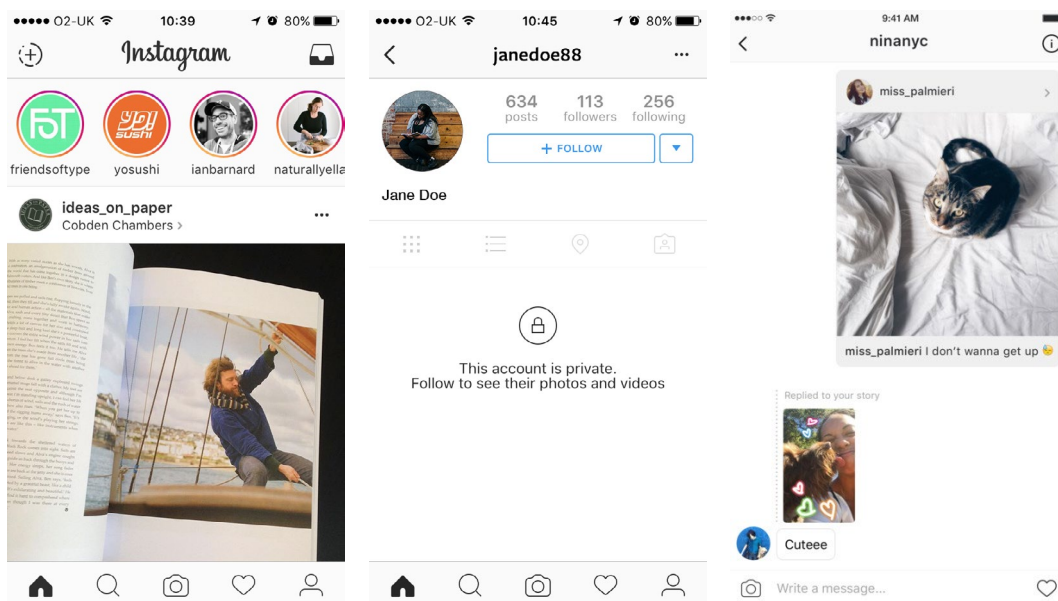

It is vital to understand the security implications around instagram's different capabilities
Images: Instagram

The risks of Instagram are very similar to those of Facebook. Without the right privacy settings, posts are visible to everybody signed into Instagram and can be shared across other platforms. Other people can post images and videos of your child without their permission, which can cause them embarrassment or invade their privacy, and direct messaging can be used as a means to contact children for the purposes of grooming.

Encourage your child to set their Instagram profile to private. If a profile is private then someone has to ask to follow that account in order to see what is on it. Follower requests can be approved or ignored by whoever owns the account, and followers can later be removed or blocked if they become a nuisance. People are not notified when they are blocked.

As with Facebook, remind your child that they don't need to put all of their details online – a short profile with minimal detail is best. Images can be very identifying so remind them not to post too much information about themselves or their friends that might cause them difficulties later on. Remind them not to accept a follow request or respond to messages from people they don't know.

Instagram has a comprehensive list of tips for parents here.
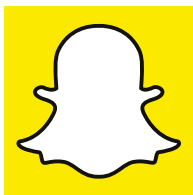
Snapchat

Snapchat allows you to take photos and make short videos on your phone and share them with friends in "moments" called Snaps, Chats and Stories. It now gets seven billion views a day. Also with a minimum age of 13, Snapchat has been designed to address the shortcoming of other platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, which allow pictures that you might regret later being digitally archived and held against you at some point later in life. Photos shared will appear on a friend's screen for 10 seconds or less. It also allows you to post a story, where you compile a series of videos and photos with accompanying text that lasts for 24 hours and can be seen as many times as friends like within that period.
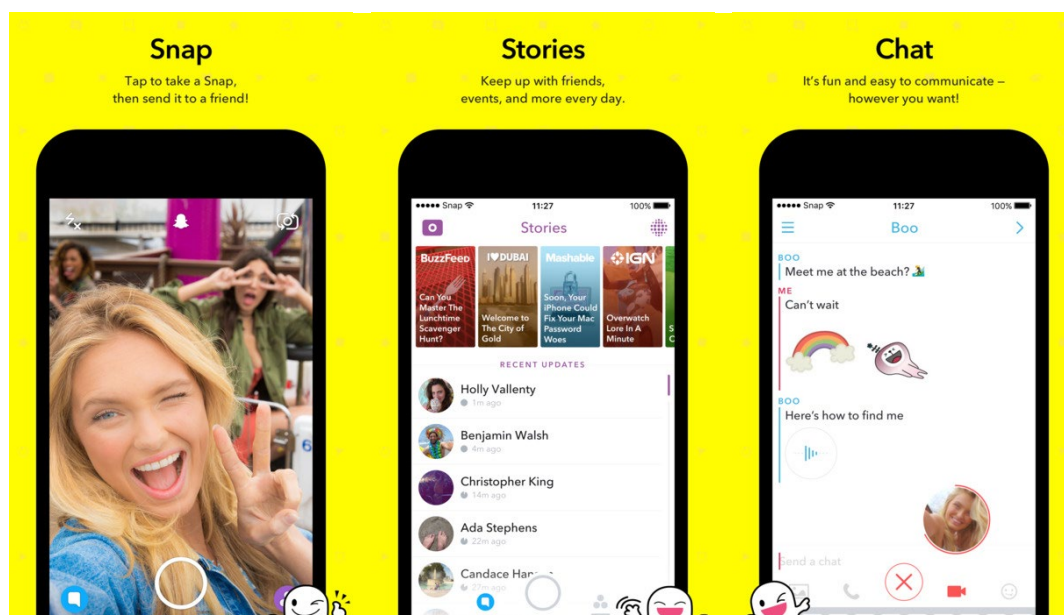
Snapchat offers various sharing facilities
Images: Snapchat

The appealing 10-second rule isn't entirely fool-proof – a "friend" may screen-shot a picture. Snapchat can warn you if someone has saved a picture, but there are ways to work around this warning using third-party apps so sharing is never 100% safe.

Snapchat allows your child to receive messages only from friends. Under the ghost icon at the top of the camera screen, you can access your profile and use the gear icon to access the settings menu. There, under the "Who can send me snaps" option, you can change the option from "Everyone" to "Friends", which will ensure your child isn't targeted by people they don't know. Users can also be blocked by going to their name on the "My friends" list, tapping the gear icon and selecting "Block".
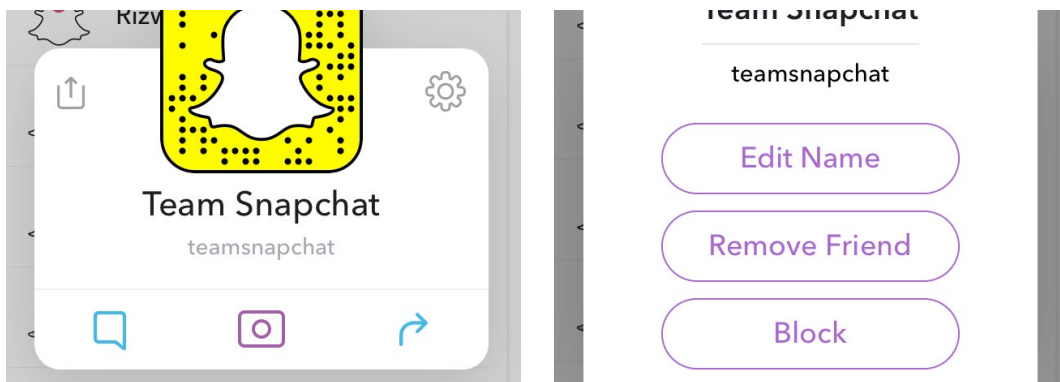
Snapchat's "Block" feature

Children enjoy snapchat because it allows them to add clever filters that distort or face-paint images with animated features – for instance, adding a pair of puppy ears, nose and a protruding dog tongue! Be aware that some of these filters can prettify you – for instance, by making you look thinner and changing your skin tone – but most are used for comic effect.

One of the advantages of Snapchat is that stories, photos and images cannot be shared. However, there is still a risk that it will be used for bullying, with the disadvantage that, because the messages disappear, there is no record of what was said. Snapchat has its own warnings and safety advice for users. Please see here.
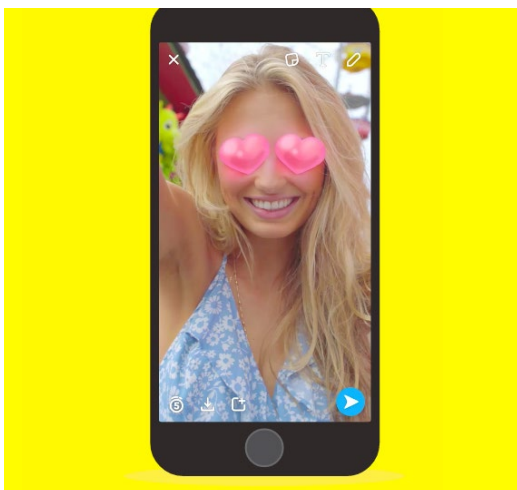
A Snapchat filter example

" I like Snapchat better than Facebook and Instagram – it allows me to send stupid faces to a small group of friends without worrying about them being shared more widely or stored permanently anywhere. It's fun!"
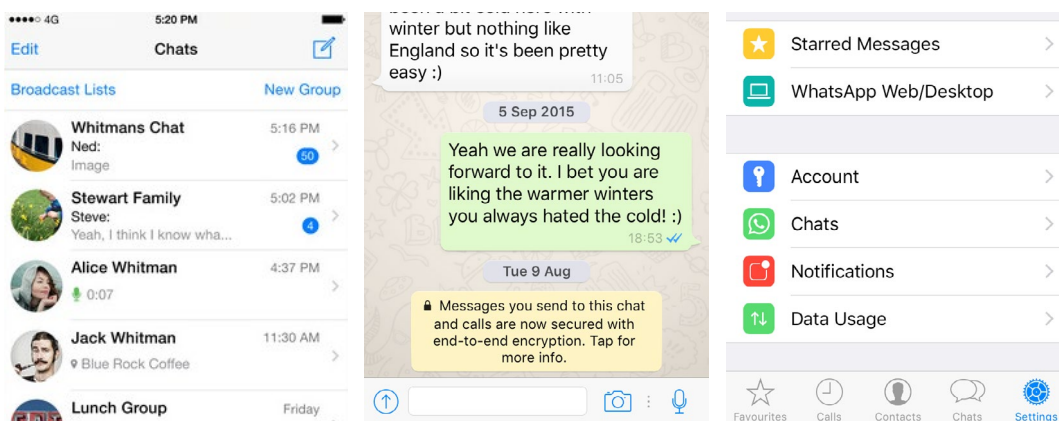
WhatsApp

Unlike many other social media platforms, WhatsApp has a minimum age of 16 years – but many younger teenagers use it, largely because it is a free alternative to text messaging.

Acquired by Facebook in 2014, WhatsApp, which has 417 million users globally, is essentially a messaging app that allows you to send messages, group texts, images, videos and audio clips to anyone in your phone's contact list who also has the app, using the internet rather than the phone network. The messages themselves are free to send and receive. It is the most popular messaging app in the world.

There is potential for people to be included in a WhatsApp group for chatting and organising events, but you can be added to a group without your permission and there is some scope for bullying here. (Not being added to a group can cause as much upset as being added!) Also, unlike Snapchat, messages on WhatsApp are permanent until they are deleted by the receiver, which means there is potential for them to be shared or used to embarrass your child.

You have to know someone's number to add them to WhatsApp, so it is worth encouraging your child not to share their number too widely. As with other apps, nuisance users can be blocked and reported. Generally, most parents tend to view the risks of the app as low, given that it is typically used as a means of communication between friends in a similar way to text messaging.

WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app in the world. Privacy can be controlled through settings
Images: WhatsApp

Twitter

Twitter, which has 313 million monthly active users, is quite different to other social media platforms. A Twitter profile tends to be very minimal. You can upload only a profile photo, a background photo and a very short description of who you are. Your profile page then consists of your tweets – posts of just 140 characters. You can also post and share images, website links and comments. Users have to be 13 or over.

Twitter is more about broadcasting than sharing or connecting. The main focus is the home page or the Twitter feed. Once you follow other users, their tweets appear on your feed in a long, fast-moving list, one after the other. If other people follow you, your tweets become visible on their feed. You can like, retweet or reply to tweets. Anything you retweet or reply to will become visible to your followers.

Most Twitter accounts are entirely public and can be viewed by anybody – even people without a Twitter account – as they can be picked up and displayed in Google searches. Also, anything you tweet can be retweeted by any number of people. Twitter is therefore a very open and public forum.

A Twitter feed example
Image: Twitter

One of the biggest issues with Twitter is trolling, whereby people post abusive content. This means your child could be vulnerable to bullying. There is also a chance that a badly worded tweet could be picked up by someone, retweeted and go viral – that is, get spread around the internet – leading to embarrassment and upset.

The Government is becoming more sensitive to the issues of social media abuse and there are a number of cases already of people arrested for making abusive, sexist, racist, homophobic and violent threats on Twitter.

There is, of course, a risk that your child may themselves be guilty of bullying. As we point out later, it is important that they remember there is a real person behind each Twitter – or any social media – account who will be affected by the words written.

Children tend not to use Twitter to socialise with their peers. Instead they use it to follow pop stars and other famous people, who post images and comments in order to keep their fans interested.

If your child likes to use Twitter in this way it might be worth encouraging them to protect their tweets, which means that only people they approve will receive their tweets. This will allow them to follow people on their Twitter feed and tweet to a small number of selected people, reducing the risk of their tweets spreading out of control.

If two Twitter users follow each other they can message each other directly. This means there is a risk of grooming. Your child should be very careful about engaging in direct message conversations with strangers.

Twitter itself offers some useful advice [here](#).

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Tumblr

Tumblr is a microblogging site where people post content in the form of blogs and follow each other's blogs – like a cross between a blog and Twitter. Blogs are posted under nicknames rather than real names and users find blogs they would like to follow by using keywords and tags. Blogs can include text, videos, audio clips, images, links and slideshows.

Due to the difficulty of making a Tumblr account private, most accounts are public. Because everything is posted under nicknames and the site is largely unmonitored, there is less incentive for posters to watch what they are saying, so there is greater potential for nastiness, bullying and trolling. Tumblr allows users to post links to pornographic material, which means it is easy for children to gain access to this material on the site – although it can be blocked and each individual newsfeed can be tailored by following particular tags. It is possible to chat to others on Tumblr, and it is common for users to ask each other to reveal their real identity before chatting.

In an NSPCC survey, 46% of children and young people described Tumblr as "risky" due to inappropriate content, sexual content and bullying. Of the platforms reviewed here, it seems to be the least suitable for children, as it is very open and unmoderated.
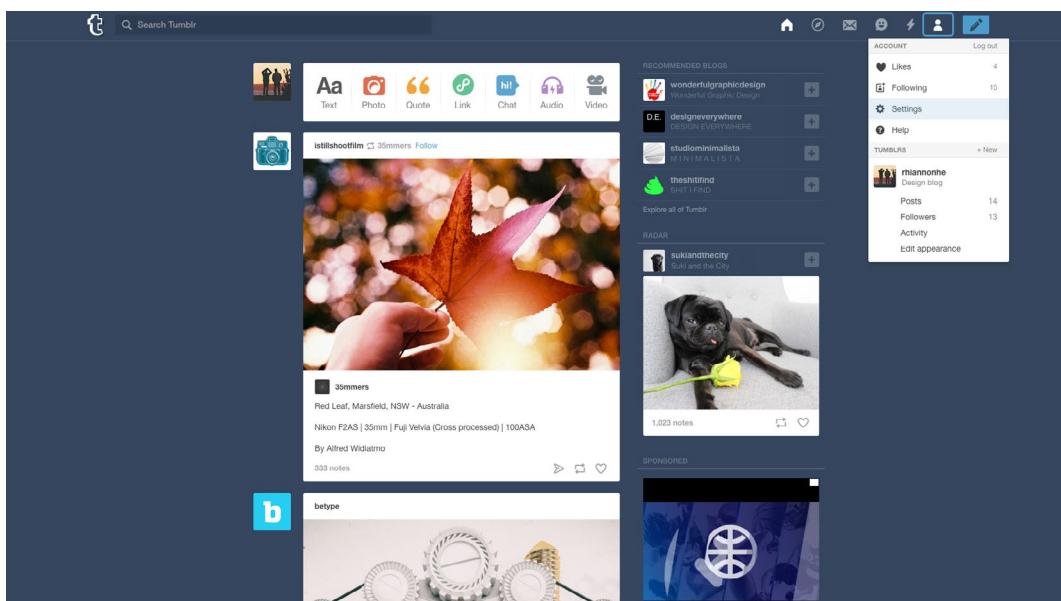
A Tumblr feed example with settings highlighted
Image: Tumblr

Working with your child to develop good social media habits

When used sensibly, social media can be a great way to keep in touch, learn, get support and find opportunities. Banning a child from using it may only encourage them to find ways around the ban and to hide what they are doing. The last thing you want is for your child to avoid asking for help for fear of getting in trouble. The NSPCC advises that talking to your child – giving them the necessary skills and knowledge – is the best way to keep them safe online.

Try to keep the conversations positive (even if it is hard at that age!). Seeking their advice in setting up your own social media apps is a good way of starting a healthy dialogue, but you can also ask them questions such as whether they know how to keep information private or how to block or report someone.

Consider looking at sites such as the NSPCC's ShareAware together to encourage a grown-up chat. The BBC's Webwise can be a handy source of general information about social media and can prompt useful discussions. Encourage your child to allow you to review their privacy settings together when you have given permission for them to use an app.

> **" My kids are often horrified at what their friends do online. That's a good opportunity for us to talk about what is appropriate and what isn't."**

Bullying

Be open-minded about the fact that if someone is being bullied then your child may be part of the problem, whether it is intentional or not. If another child complains about your child, be prepared to address that honestly and deal with any problem behaviour. Your child (or the child bullying yours) may not be aware that they have caused hurt. Cyber bullying gives the bullies an anonymous voice and a distance from the victim that can make it all seem very unreal and non-harmful – the perpetrators don't see the tears and pain they cause, which often makes it easier for them to do things they wouldn't usually do. You can read more on bullying here. Bullying UK offers some useful insights too – please see here.

Social media and abusive relationships

Research carried out by the NHS revealed that one in five teenage girls had been assaulted by a boyfriend and that violence was more common among younger couples than older ones. But physical violence isn't the only issue children have to contend with in relationships. Emotional abuse and controlling and coercive behaviour, which includes control and manipulation through the use of social media, were recognised in 2015 as forms of domestic violence and can attract a jail term of up to five years.

Social media can be used by abusive partners as a way of isolating, embarrassing and monitoring their victim. This form of emotional abuse has been shown to have a more profound, long-term effect on the victim's wellbeing than physical violence due to the way that it damages self-esteem and causes the victim to doubt themselves.

Even when there is no relationship, abusive behaviours like sexting (sending unwanted sexual messages) and revenge porn (sharing of explicit photos without consent) can also be used to embarrass and control someone.

Apps and social media are a particularly insidious way to carry out abuse as the victim can feel like they have no way of escaping from their abuser. If social media is the main way a victim's friends communicate, being unable to use it freely due to the control of an abuser can be extremely isolating.

The loveisrespect website provides some excellent advice on how to support a child who is in an abusive relationship. It also provides advice on how to address the issue of abuse with children before they experience it so that they don't get drawn into coercive situations. The NSPCC offers advice on sexting here.

Curfew

Many parents impose an online curfew – or try to. It is well known that the teenage body clock can be set to make them come to life late at night (and sleep till lunchtime if undisturbed!). If they have a bedtime it is good practice for your child not to be on a computer or mobile phone screen an hour before (and taking a phone to bed can lead to them having online conversations way beyond the hour they should be asleep).

There is also the option of access controls. These can restrict your child's internet access to certain times and prevent them from logging on when, for instance, they ought to be tucked up in bed! Such controls can be found on many broadband routers; instructions for BT's, for example, can be found here.

" We have a compromise. We let them use their phones until bedtime, but we've set up a charging station in the kitchen and insist that everyone's phone – including ours – is in the charging area overnight so they're fully charged for the next day."

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Conclusion

Useful advice to give your child

⚙ **Generate secure passwords** – ones that others won't easily guess – and keep them safe. It is fine to write passwords down and keep them where it is unlikely anyone who has access to you phone/computer will find them. If you ever suspect someone might know your password, change it straight away.

⚙ **You don't have to share your password,** even with your best friend or boyfriend/girlfriend.

⚙ **Check the privacy settings** every time you set up a new social media profile. Check how visible all your details are and think about how much of that detail you want to have out in public.

⚙ **Always post your profile as if it could go public**, even if your profile is private.

⚙ **Don't leave your social profile logged in** on any device to which other people have access.

⚙ **If someone on a social media site is posting offensive material, don't get involved – report them.** The vast majority of sites have a well-moderated system for dealing with nuisance users and will quickly remove the material and discipline the user.

⚙ **If someone is bullying you online, don't get involved and end up in a very public argument – block them right away.** On most sites it is possible to block someone without them knowing. Then report them on the site and tell someone close (a parent, a friend or a teacher) and if possible take a screen capture of what the bully has written so you have a record of what has happened.

⚙ **Always treat invitations to talk to a person you don't know with suspicion.** Unless you know a person in real life, you can never be sure that the person you are talking to online is who they say they are.

⚙ **Don't post in anger.** If upset, talk to someone first. We often say things we regret when we are angry, but when they are written down for everyone to see they can cause much more damage.

⚙ **Respect the privacy of others.** Remember that when posting a picture of a friend, or making a comment on their profile, other people will see it and it may be embarrassing for them.

> **" I have a simple rule for my kids: don't say anything on social media you wouldn't say to someone's face. "**

⚙️ **Sometimes the meaning of what you are saying can be lost when it is written down.** Be aware that a comment or post that you meant to be funny might not seem that way to others. Sarcasm doesn't travel well over the internet!

⚙️ **It is all right to set limits with your friends.** You don't have to be constantly available or engage with absolutely everything they put online.

⚙️ **What you see online isn't always an accurate representation of someone's life.** Social media stars spend a lot of time ensuring that their life looks exciting and interesting, when in fact it is likely to be just as dull as everyone else's. They are paid to look attractive so that advertisers can link to their followers.

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A last thought

Social media is here to stay. It is almost inevitable that your child will embrace and use it in some form or another. And in many ways this is no bad thing: as we touched upon earlier, social media can serve as a positive force when used sensibly, correctly and responsibly.

When used foolishly, wrongly or irresponsibly, however, the power of social media can be dangerous. This is why it is so important that you and your child understand what can happen when the necessary precautions are either ignored or not known.

We hope that in this guide we have helped not just to explain some of the risks but to outline some of the potential solutions. And we hope that in doing so we have helped to make social media safer for your child and something that, in turn, holds fewer fears for you.

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Appendix

Further social media platforms

New social media platforms are emerging all the time. Below we list some of these and offer a succinct overview of each. Although such a list can never be truly complete, we will aim to update this section as and when further potentially significant platforms enter the market.

GroupMe

Photo/video/calendar-sharing app with no fees or limits on direct or group messages. Popular with older teens.

Shots

Selfie-sharing app designed exclusively for images shot with front-facing cameras. Chat possible, but no comments.

Kik Messenger

Texting app with no message/character limits. Some users find chat partners by sharing user names.

Whisper

"Confessional" app that allows users to anonymously post their thoughts, plus accompanying images. Frequent adult content.

Omegle

Stranger-pairing, no-registration-required, "no fuss" app that is inappropriate for children of any age. Frequent adult content.

Viber

Photo/video/message-sharing app. Messages can be sent to up to a hundred users simultaneously.

ooVoo

App that allows up to a dozen users to participate in video chat. Default settings impose no access/contact restrictions.

Vine

Rapidly growing video-sharing app that is popular with casual users and businesses alike. More than 40 million users.

Periscope

Live video-streaming app owned by Twitter. More than 10 million users. Named App of the Year by Apple in 2015.

Yik Yak

App that allows users to post brief comments to fellow users in immediate vicinity. Reveals user location. Adult content.