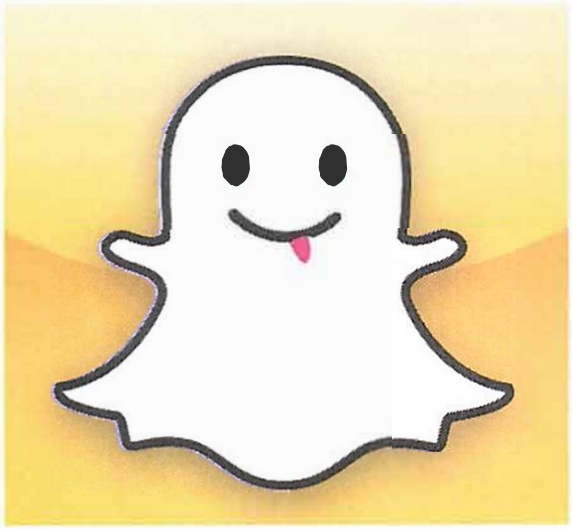
A Parents' Guide to

Snapchat



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Top 5 Questions Parents Have About Snapchat

1. Why do kids love Snapchat?

They love the spontaneity of it. It's been (rightfully) drummed into their heads for years that photos and videos you share are on the Web forever and are really hard to take back, so Snapchat's a relief in a lot of ways. It's playful and "in the moment"— a nice change from the self-presentation and reputation issues in social media services that display photos indefinitely. They don't have to worry about some invisible audience.

2. Does Snapchat have a minimum age?

Yes, the minimum age is 13, in compliance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). But, when you download it, Snapchat asks for your date of birth, and—if your birth year tells it you're under 13—you're redirected to the kid version, called "SnapKidz." SnapKidz users can't add friends or share anything, and the app doesn't send any information to the company. Instead, kids' photos and videos are saved just to their devices' "camera roll." If you're a kid, that means you can only play with the photos, etc. in SnapKidz on your own device—not share them. So you'll be looking for work-arounds such as sharing them with a different media-sharing tool on your phone, such as texting, email, Facebook, etc. —or you can just delete Snapkidz and start over with a fictitious birth date.

3. What are the risks in using Snapchat?

Though there's nothing inherently dangerous about Snapchat, it's often referred to as "the sexting app." There's no research showing that's true and plenty of anecdotal evidence that it isn't the focus for teens, but—like any media-sharing service—Snapchat can be used for sexting, harassment, etc. It can be particularly hurtful if that happens, because Snapchat is typically used among friends (or at least people who have each other's username or phone numbers).

4. Is it good that Snapchat photos and videos disappear in seconds?

Yes, because photos and videos aren't put on display, they're not "out there" forever, typically, so there isn't the self-presentation or reputation anxiety. The ephemeral aspect actually adds a degree of safety, as long as people don't have a false sense of security about it—because media can also be saved as screenshots or photographed with another phone and shared with or without the originator's knowledge. That can be good or bad—bad because a screen-captured image can embarrass the people in it, good because—if things do go wrong—it can be used for evidence against someone trying to hurt the people in it.

5. What's the best way to help kids stay safe in Snapchat?

As with all social media, respect toward self and others makes us safer. Whether the experience is positive or negative depends so much on how people use the app or service, whether or not they're really friends, and how they treat each other in Snapchat. Friends may kid around, but most kids treat their friends well. It just never hurts to have a conversation (never a lecture) with them about how they use Snapchat just to be sure.

Snapchat is a photo- and video-sharing app with a twist. The media you send disappear seconds after they're viewed—you get to decide how long a photo will "live," from 1 to 10 seconds, after it's viewed. Users love the spontaneity of that—it feels like socializing that's (digital) footprint-free—but, as we'll cover in this guide, there are ways to capture and recover images, so no one should develop a false sense of "security" about that.

You get to decide how long your photo can be viewed.

Snapchat runs on the Apple iPhone and Android phones but it also runs on iPad, Android tablets and iPod Touch, which are often used by very young children. It was developed as an antidote to "traditional" social networking services, where images can stay around forever and people have to worry about self-presentation and reputations. Snapchat users feel like they don't have to worry if they're having a bad hair day or just want to make a silly face.

Sharing a moment

Be nice—it really helps. Just as in physical settings, people generally react, interact and share things in a friendly way on Snapchat too. Among friends sharing —especially with photos on mobile devices—it's usually a lighthearted thing, sometimes even goofy. It's just a shared moment like always, only now it can also be shared from the other side of the planet. It's not about documenting anything—it's visual chat in the moment. That's why the app's called "Snapchat." So if used the way intended, it's just a quick freeze-frame of a moment. The ephemeral nature of it is really a security feature.

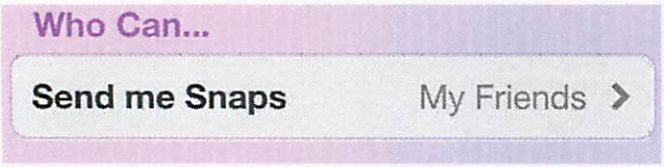
One-to-one sharing. Snapchat was designed for sharing between a couple of friends, but you can share with more than one person by selecting each recipient manually. Unlike social network sites and other media-sharing apps, you can't post publicly. You can only share with friends and you get to decide who to share with each time you send a "snap." There's some safety to this—no automated mass-sharing that could embarrass intentionally or by mistake.

Context is key. A positive experience in Snapchat truly depends on the situation being snapped and the relationship you have with the friends you're sharing with. So, as in all other relating in life, help your kids understand that there's safety in kindness.

Optimizing Snapchat for you

Manage your settings. Snapchat's settings are really basic, but there's one setting that can help a lot: If you don't want just anybody sending you photos or videos, make sure you're using the default setting to only accept incoming pictures from "My Friends." Here's how to be sure:

Click the Menu button in the lower right corner to access settings. By "Send me Snaps," be sure it says "My Friends" not "Everyone." That way, only people you've "added" (or friended) in Snapchat can send you media.



You can limit who can send you snaps to "My Friends" only.

Screen capture is possible. The Snapchat app doesn't allow users to save photos, but smartphone operating systems do allow users to capture what's on the phone's screen (in a kind of photo called a "screen capture"). It's also possible to take a picture of the screen with another camera or camera phone. And it's possible for a computer forensics expert with special skills and tools to "undelete" Snapchat images after they've "disappeared," but this requires physical access to the phone (it can't be done remotely) and, for now at least, it's an expensive and time-consuming process. So there's no 100% guarantee photos and videos will disappear, and it never hurts to remind kids never to send media that could be embarrassing to them or anyone depicted if seen by grandparents, future love interests or college administrations officers.

Don't screen-capture without permission. Some people think of this as basic good manners—to record someone on the phone or capture an embarrassing moment without permission has always been considered rude, and the same is true in Snapchat. If someone shared a photo of you asleep in a car with your mouth hanging open, you probably would not be ok with that. Most teens probably already know that's the kind of behavior people want to avoid in Snapchat, but it doesn't hurt to ask them.

You'll be notified (most of the time). Snapchat lets you know when your message has been opened and—usually—if it has been captured and saved by the recipient. We say "usually" because it doesn't work 100% of the time and there are workarounds, including some "hacks" and the ability to take a picture of the screen with a camera, including a friend's cell phone camera.

Protect passwords. Like all services, make sure you have a strong and unique password and, parents, please remind your kids not to share their passwords with anyone, even their best friends. If someone has their password, it's possible for them to impersonate and embarrass them. For more on this, visit *passwords.connectsafely.org*.

Keeping it real. Snapchat is a service designed for "real life" friends. It doesn't enable people to search for new "friends" like some services, but there are still ways to *find people you* don't know (such as finding their Snapchat username on other services and "adding" them to your Snapchat friends list). Snapchat has a feature called "HISCORE" that shows up on users' profiles and indicates their level of activity on the

service. It doesn't post HISCORE on a leader board anywhere, so there's really no reason for kids to try to build up a high score.

Sexting concerns. Of course parents worry about sexting—kids sending naked or sexually explicit pictures of themselves—but it's not nearly as common as some media reports have suggested. In fact, research shows it's pretty rare among kids. Still, sexting certainly can happen. Teens need to know what the implications of sexting are. The best policy is never to take or distribute any images that could get you in trouble now or in the future. For more on this, see *sexting.connectsafely.org*.

For photo-sharers under 13. SnapKidz, the version for kids (Apple devices only for now), doesn't allow kids under 13 who sign up with their correct birth date to use the app to share images and doesn't pass information to the company, but it does save images to their device's camera, which means that it's still possible for kids to share them via texting, email or a social networking app.

What to do about harassment or unwanted snaps

Block the user. To block someone from sending you snaps, tap the Menu button, then My Friends. When you find the person's name in your friends list (or under "Recent" if you haven't added them), swipe right across their name on Apple devices or, on Android phones, press and hold on the person's name, then press Edit and then Block—or just Delete if you want them off your list. And because there is no mass-sharing, no one will see your content unless you choose to send it to them.

Flag underage users. If you are concerned about a person using Snapchat who is under 13, you can report the person by sending an email to *support@snapchat.com*.

Report abuse. If a child receives inappropriate photos or videos or someone's harassing him or her, contact Snapchat via *safety@snapchat.com* or by going to *Snapchat.com* and clicking on Support. In the very unlikely event you encounter anything that appears to be illegal or dangerous, or if you have reason to believe someone is at risk of harm or self- harm, contact your local police or dial 911 (in the United States) immediately.

Delete the account. If Snapchat isn't for you (or your kid), you can delete the account by going to *http://www.snapchat.com/a/delete_account* as long as you have the user name and password. If you wish to delete the account and your child won't give you his or her password, you can submit a deletion request at *http://www.snapchat.com/static_files/deletion_request.pdf*.

Some closing thoughts for parents

Snapchat is one of thousands of media- sharing apps that kids use and it's not even the

only one with disappearing pictures (Facebook, for example, has a similar app called Poke). New apps are popping up all the time, and parents can't possibly be on top of all of them. That's why it's important for kids to develop critical thinking skills. But know, too, that the values and social skills you're teaching them help them stay safe in digital media and other aspects of their lives.

And speaking of critical thinking, there's no need to panic every time you hear a media report about something awful happening in social media. The reason the news media cover awful situations is because they're rare. How often do you see headlines about planes landing safely? We only hear about the ones that crash. Of course kids can get into trouble using Snapchat or any other service, but the same can be said for swimming pools. That's why we teach them how to swim.

As for our job as parents, it's important to keep the lines of communication with your kids as open as possible and work together to figure out what's appropriate for them, in terms of safety, privacy, reputation and time management. It generally just works better to talk with our kids about their favorite tools—with genuine interest, not fear—because they're more likely to come to you when they need help and you're much more likely to be kept in the loop about all the cool technology they use and you get to learn about.