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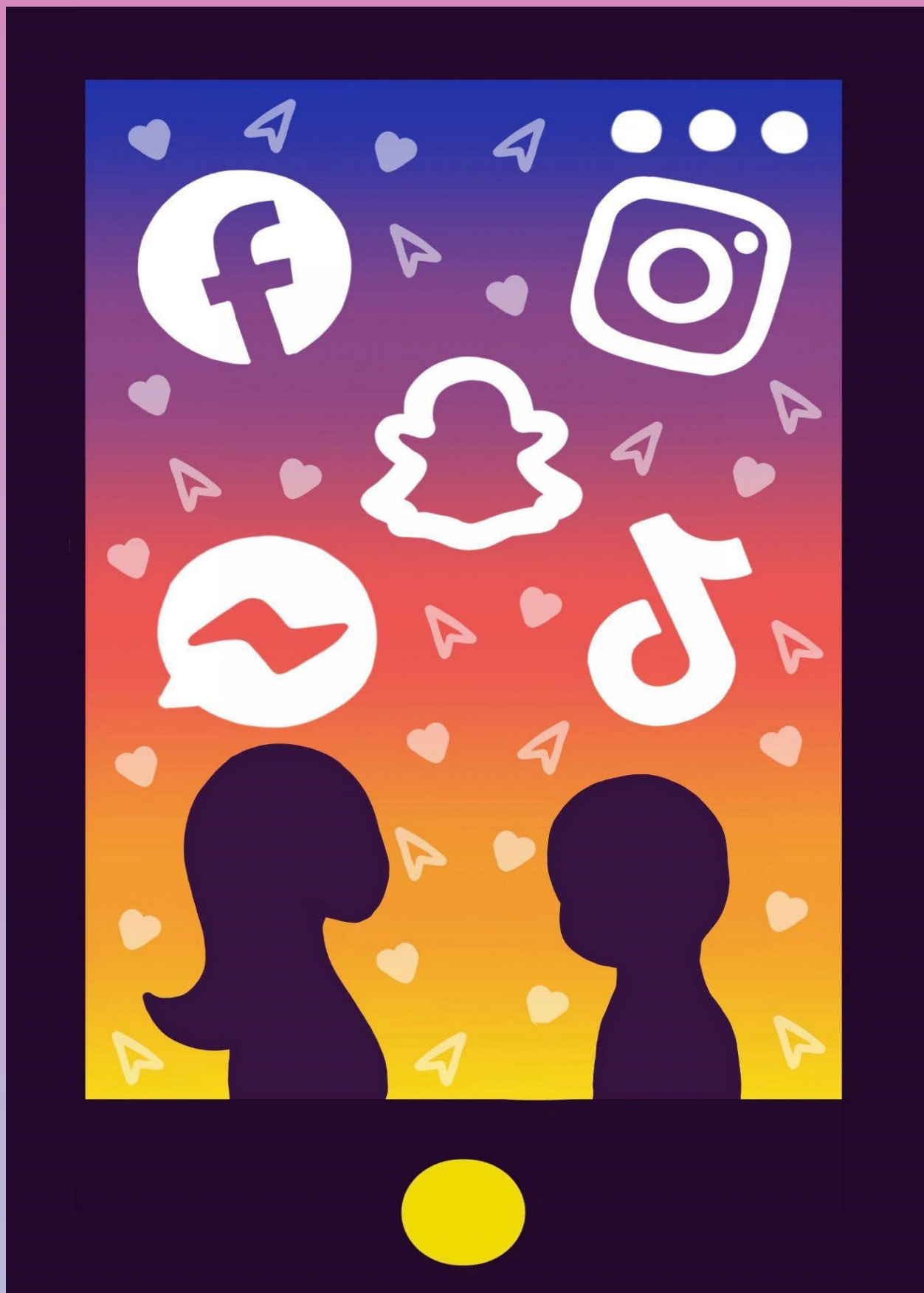
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A Parent's Guide to Social Media Safety



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A Parent's Guide to Social Media Safety

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The goal of this White Paper is to provide parents and other caregivers with a compilation of literature from some of the most popular social media platforms in one convenient place. It aims to help parents understand what parental controls and account settings are available, so they can facilitate important conversations with their teens regarding social media safety.



* Students enrolled in the Gator TeamChild Juvenile Law Clinic provide representation to children in dependency, education, and delinquency related matters as well as work on systemic policy issues affecting children and families.

* I would like to dedicate this guide to my brother, Jack Grimley, who inspired me to make it from his observations as a high school history teacher, and who helped me every step of the way. I would also like to thank my sister, Hannah Grimley, for creating the beautiful artwork on the cover. Finally, I would like to thank my other sister and colleague, Rachel Grimley, for assisting me with grammar and citations.

A Parent's¹ Guide to Teen's Social Media Safety

The world of social media can be overwhelming! The days of shared family desktops have been replaced with personal cell phones, computers, and tablets—teenagers these days have the entire internet at their fingertips.

Social media gives teens the ability to communicate and express themselves in exciting and unique ways, and if used correctly, can be a very positive tool in a teen's journey into adulthood. However, social media, like all technological advancements, comes with inherent risks that can negatively impact teens.

As parents of teens, it can be overwhelming to hear all of the harms that social media can cause, and how teens can be the most susceptible to those harms. There are multiple platforms that have a wide variety of functions, many of which may not have been around when you were growing up—how can you be expected to encourage teens to be safe online when you don't understand what they are doing in the first place?

Moreover, it can be daunting to think about approaching your teen about online safety when you don't understand your options. Luckily, most social media platforms have a parental control feature and a wide variety of optional safety features that users can put into place. Thus, it's important to understand what these features are to encourage your teen to use them.

This guide compiles literature from some of the most popular social media platforms in one convenient place. It will help you—as parents of teens—understand what parental controls and account settings are available so that you can facilitate important conversations with your teens.

¹ “Parents” is being used to indicate any type of caregiver or guardian.



Instagram

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a free photo and video sharing app available on iPhone and Android. People can upload photos or videos to Instagram and share them with their followers or with a select group of friends. They can also view, comment, and like posts shared by their friends on Instagram.

What are the Risks of Instagram?

Instagram is a great way for teens to connect with their friends, share fun parts of their lives, and view interesting content. However, there are inherent risks that come with the platform.

- **Sharing Personal Information:** Because Instagram is a photo and video sharing app, when a photo or video is shared of the teen, it automatically gives information about the age, gender, and location of the teen. Especially with stories (which are oftentimes uploaded in real time), it can provide this information in the moment.
- **Predatory Direct Messaging:** Instagram's direct messaging feature can open the door for strangers to message teens privately. Some common predatory motives for direct messaging include sexual exploitation, trafficking, or scams. These predators are especially dangerous because they can make fake profiles that make them look like peers, luring the teen into believing they are talking to someone their own age.
- **Cyberbullying:** As social media use has grown worldwide, there has become a widespread issue with cyberbullying. Bullies gain confidence from the anonymity of social media and from not actually having the interaction in person. Additionally, bullies can have unlimited access to a teen through social media commenting and direct messaging, which can be much more overwhelming to teens than traditional in-person bullying.
- **Depression, Eating Disorders, and Other Mental Health Issues:** Instagram gives users the ability to edit and perfect their photos or videos however they want before uploading. This

can encourage teens to compare themselves to the edited people they see online, which can lead to depression, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and other mental health issues.

Parental Resources

Instagram has a [Family Center feature](#)² where teens can allow a parent or guardian to supervise their Instagram account, provide extra support, and help balance their time. Some of the features include:

- Viewing how much time your teen spends on Instagram;
- Setting time limits for how long your teen can use Instagram each day;
- Scheduling breaks where your teen will be blocked from using Instagram;
- Receiving insights about filed reports your teen chooses to share;
- Viewing and receiving updates on what accounts your teen follows and the accounts that follow your teen; and
 - Seeing your teen’s settings and being notified if a change is made to those settings.

Importantly, parents or teens can remove supervision anytime and it’s automatically removed when the teen turns 18. So, it is important that you discuss the Family Center feature with your teens and agree to the terms.

Account Controls

Instagram provides a wide variety of [privacy features](#)³ that parents should discuss with their teens and encourage them to use. Some of these features include:

- [Setting accounts to private](#);⁴
- [Reporting posts, accounts, comments, messages](#);⁵ and
- [Blocking other accounts](#).⁶

Instagram also provides teens with resources on how to handle [abuse, spam, scams, requests for nude or sexual images, and threats to share private images or personal information](#).⁷

² *Parental Supervision*, INSTAGRAM, <https://help.instagram.com/309877544512275?ref=supip> (last visited May 10, 2024).

³ *Manage Privacy on Instagram*, INSTAGRAM, https://help.instagram.com/667810236572057/?helpref=uf_share (last visited May 10, 2024).

⁴ *Make Your Instagram Account Private*, INSTAGRAM, https://help.instagram.com/448523408565555/?helpref=uf_share (last visited May 10, 2024).

⁵ *How to Report Things*, INSTAGRAM, https://help.instagram.com/2922067214679225/?helpref=hc_fnav (last visited May 10, 2024).

⁶ *Blocking People*, INSTAGRAM, https://help.instagram.com/426700567389543/?helpref=hc_fnav (last visited May 10, 2024).

⁷ *Abuse and Spam*, INSTAGRAM, https://help.instagram.com/165828726894770/?helpref=hc_fnav (last visited May 10, 2024).



Snapchat

What is Snapchat?

Snapchat is a multimedia instant messaging app. One of the key features of Snapchat that makes it unique is that pictures and messages are usually only available for a short time before they disappear.

What are the Risks of Snapchat?⁸

- Sexting and Inappropriate Content: Because Snapchat pictures and messages are deleted by default, many teens feel safer sharing explicit or inappropriate content. However, Snapchat pictures and messages can be screenshotted by the receiver.
- Exploitation: Because teens may feel safer sharing explicit or inappropriate content, it opens the door to predators to use that content against the teen and exploit them for more content or money.
- Cyberbullying: As social media use has grown worldwide, there has become a widespread issue with cyberbullying. Bullies gain confidence from the anonymity of social media and from not actually having the interaction in person. Additionally, bullies can have unlimited access to a teen through Snapchat messaging, which can be much more overwhelming to teens than traditional in-person bullying.
- Drug Culture: Illicit activities such as drug dealing have made their way onto social media platforms, with Snapchat being especially popular because of the disappearing messages. Although Snapchat has policies against such activities, it can be hard to detect. For example, there have been reports of drug dealers using code words and symbols to avoid detection.
- Sharing Personal Information: Snapchat's location sharing feature provides real time location information of users. Additionally, snapchats are usually shared in real time, and therefore can inherently share the age, gender, and location of the teen.

⁸ Cari Whitlock, *Is Snapchat Safe for Kids: Should You Let Your Child Use It?*, HEALTHY YOUNG MINDS, <https://www.healthyyoungminds.com/is-snapchat-safe-for-kids/> (last visited May 10, 2024).

Parental Resources

Snapchat has a [Family Center feature](#)⁹ that helps parents get more insight into who their teens are friends with on Snapchat, and who they have been communicating with, while still respecting their teens' privacy and autonomy. It's designed to reflect the way parents engage with their teens in the real world, where parents usually know who their teens are friends with and when they are hanging out, but don't eavesdrop on their private conversations. Some of these features include:

- Seeing which Snapchat friends or Groups your teens have chatted with in the last seven days, in a way that still protects their privacy by not revealing the actual contents of their conversations (Snaps and messages);
- Seeing a complete list of Group members in Group chats your teen is in that have been active over the last seven days;
- Seeing a complete list of your teen's existing friends and easily view new friends your teens have added, making it easy to start conversations about who your teens' new contacts are;
- Limit your teen's ability to view certain content in the Stories and Spotlight tabs; and
- Easily and confidentially reporting any accounts you may be concerned about directly to their 24/7 Trust and Safety team.
- Snapchat also provides a [step-by-step guide and video tutorial](#)¹⁰ on how to set up the Family Center feature.

Importantly, parents or teens can remove supervision anytime and it's automatically removed when the teen turns 18. Therefore, it is important that you discuss the Family Center feature with your teens and agree to the terms. Snapchat also provides parents with a [Safety Checklist](#)¹¹ to facilitate conversations with their teen about safety on Snapchat, and remind them of important features available to them.

⁹ *What is Family Centre?*, SNAPCHAT, https://help.snapchat.com/hc/en-gb/articles/7121384944788-What-is-Family-Centre?_ga=2.89010203.1692953179.1712409319-995867408.1712409319&lang=en-US (last visited May 10, 2024).

¹⁰ *Tools and Resources for Parents*, SNAPCHAT, https://parents.snapchat.com/parental-controls?utm_source=GoogleSEM&utm_medium=PAIDUA&utm_campaign=Safety_2023&utm_term=ParentalGuidance&utm_content=SafetyEducation&gad_source=1 (last visited May 10, 2024).

¹¹ *Safety Checklist for Parents*, CTFASSETS.NET, https://downloads.ctfassets.net/e6fbkbb3ka3b/6ymsldl3krLU6laf6ZqnPQ/dca3c265e4f37cb2ec05eec4dfebd5dc/Checlist_PDF_en_GB.pdf (last visited May 10, 2024).

Account Controls

Snapchat provides a variety of [privacy features](#)¹² that parents should discuss with their teens and encourage them to use. For all accounts created by teens under 18, the following features automatically apply:

- Contact settings for teens are set to friends and phone contacts only, and they can't be expanded to strangers;
- Location sharing turned off. If a teen wishes to use the location-sharing feature, they can only share their location with people they are already friends with;
- Send teens regular reminders to check their privacy settings and account security;
- Not allowing teens to communicate one-to-one with another person unless they are friends;
- Making it difficult for strangers to find teens on Snapchat by not allowing them to show up in search results unless they have several mutual friends or are existing phone contacts;
- Offering easy Snapchat safety tools for blocking someone; and
- Sending teens an in-app warning if someone they don't share a mutual friend with tries to contact them.

Although these settings are placed on a teen's account by default, if the teen lies about their age when making the account, they may have to go in and turn some of these features on manually.

A unique aspect of Snapchat that oftentimes leads to concerns is the fact that messages and pictures delete by default after a certain amount of time. Luckily, Snapchat has an online reporting tool that retains data while reviewing reports from teens or parents. Some features of the reporting tool are:

- Confidential reporting;
- Online reporting tool that you do not need a snapchat account to use;
- 24/7 Global Trust and Safety team; and
- If an incident must be referred to law enforcement, Snapchat retains the data for an even longer period of time in case law enforcement wants to follow up.

¹² *Safeguards for Teens*, SNAPCHAT, <https://parents.snapchat.com/safeguards-for-teens> (last visited May 10, 2024).



TikTok

What is TikTok?

TikTok is a social media app dedicated to short-form videos created for and consumed by users. TikTok is one of the newest and most popular social media platforms today worldwide.

What are the Risks of TikTok?¹³

- **Social Media Addiction**: TikTok's "For You" feed is highly personalized and recommends an endless number of short videos that teens can scroll through. This leads to a much higher chance of addiction than many other social media apps.
- **Sexualization**: Common trends on TikTok include suggestive dances/lip syncing in provocative clothing. Thus, girls are encouraged to recreate these videos, which can lead to hypersexualization and lots of male attention. When a teenage girl is constantly rewarded for her sexuality, they can come to believe that their value is in how they look.
- **Depression, Eating Disorders, and Other Mental Health Issues**: TikTok is great for learning new things. Many creators share certain "life hacks," fashion advice, cooking tips, fitness/nutrition advice, etc. However, TikTok's recommended algorithms are very powerful, and can quickly turn an innocent search into unhealthy content. For example, if a teen is searching for workouts, TikTok can recommend content that encourages eating disorders. Additionally, TikTok gives users the ability to use certain filters and editing tools before uploading, which can encourage teens to compare themselves to these edited versions of people.
- **Predatory Direct Messaging**: TikTok's direct messaging feature can open the door for strangers to message teens privately. Some common predatory motives for direct messaging

¹³ *Global: TikTok's 'For You' Feed Risks Pushing Children and Young People Towards Harmful Mental Health Content*, AMNESTY INT'L (Nov. 7, 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/tiktok-risks-pushing-children-towards-harmful-content/>.

include sexual exploitation, trafficking, or scams. These predators are especially dangerous because they can make fake profiles that make them look like peers, luring the teen into believing they are talking to someone their own age.

- **Security Risks:** TikTok, unlike most other popular social media platforms, is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. All social media platforms collect personal data on their users and use it for a variety of purposes, but because of TikTok's ownership, that data is going to China, as opposed to the US. Although there are lots of theories and unknowns about the risks of this arrangement, parents should be aware that this data can be used to alter the algorithm and recommend videos to teens that support certain positions that China takes that are contrary to the US.

Parental Resources

TikTok provides a comprehensive [Family Pairing feature](#),¹⁴ where parents can set certain restrictions on their teens accounts for safety. Some of these features include:

- Daily screen time restrictions, where you can:
 - Set your teen's screen time limit directly from your own account.
 - Set one screen time limit to apply to all your teen's devices.
 - Set a passcode that you can choose to enter after your teen reaches their time to allow them to return to TikTok.
- Screen time dashboards, where you can get a summary of your teen's time spent on TikTok including:
 - The cumulative time spent each day for the last 4 weeks.
 - The number of times your teen opened the app each day for the last 4 weeks.
- Muting push notifications, where you can decide when to mute your teen's push notifications (although this is defaulted for certain ages);
- Filter video keywords, where you can select keywords or hashtags to exclude from your teen's For You (recommended by the app) and Following (what accounts they follow post) feeds, as well as manage the visibility of your keywords list;
- Controlling whether the account is on restricted mode, which limits exposure to content that may not be suitable for teens;
- Getting notifications if your teen unlinks your accounts from the Family Pairing setting;

¹⁴ *User Safety*, TIKTOK, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/safety-hc/account-and-user-safety/user-safety#4> (last visited May 10, 2024).

- Decide whether your teens account may be public or private;
- Deciding whether your teen’s account can be recommended to others;
- Restricting who can send your teen direct messages, or turning direct messaging off completely;
- Deciding who can view your teens liked videos; and
- Deciding who can comment on your teen’s videos.

Importantly, parents or teens can remove supervision anytime and it’s automatically removed when the teen turns 18. Therefore, it is important that you discuss the Family Pairing feature with your teens and agree to the terms.

Account Controls

TikTok provides a variety of [privacy features](#)¹⁵ that parents should discuss with their teens and encourage them to use. TikTok’s Family Pairing feature is notably comprehensive, where parents can control almost all the potential privacy features through Family Pairing. However, a few important talking points to have with your teen are:

- Private v. Public Accounts
 - Accounts by teens ages 13 to 15 are set to private by default, but teens 16 to 17 years old may choose which account setting they wish to use. The differences between public and private accounts are:
 - Private accounts:
 - Only people you approve can follow you and view your videos, bio, likes, as well as your following and followers lists.
 - Others won't be able to Duet, Stitch, or download your videos, or add your posts to their Stories.

¹⁵ *Teen Privacy and Safety Settings*, TIKTOK, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/account-and-privacy/account-privacy-settings/privacy-and-safety-settings-for-users-under-age-18> (last visited May 10, 2024).

■ Public accounts:

- Anyone can choose to follow you.
- If you don't adjust your privacy settings, your profile and videos will be visible to, and can be shared by, anyone on or off TikTok, whether or not they have a TikTok account.
- Your content may appear in search engines, blogs, social media posts, and news sites.
- People may be able to Duet, Stitch, and download your videos depending on your privacy settings.

The most important note about public accounts is that the teen has the ability to adjust certain settings for more privacy, as opposed to those settings being on by default. So, discussing with your teen which settings are important to them to have off and which ones they are willing to turn on can help customize the account to a place where both you and your teen are comfortable.



Facebook/Messenger

What are Facebook & Messenger?

Facebook is a social networking site that helps users connect and share with the people you care about. Facebook is oftentimes used to keep up with family and friends, and allows users to post “statuses,” photos, videos, and stories, and interact with others. Facebook is also very popular for colleges, as many colleges have pages for each incoming class where they can ask questions, meet friends, find roommates, etc. Messenger is the direct messaging feature of Facebook, which is in its own app.

What are the Risks of Facebook & Messenger?

- **Sharing Personal Information:** Because Facebook allows photo and video sharing, when a photo or video is shared of the teen, it automatically gives information about the age, gender, and location of the teen. Especially with stories (which are oftentimes uploaded in real time), it can provide this information in the moment.
- **Predatory Direct Messaging:** Facebook Messenger can open the door for strangers to message teens privately. Some common predatory motives for direct messaging include sexual exploitation, trafficking, or scams. These predators are especially dangerous because they can make fake profiles that make them look like peers, luring the teen into believing they are talking to someone their own age.
- **Cyberbullying:** As social media use has grown worldwide, there has become a widespread issue with cyberbullying. Bullies gain confidence from the anonymity of social media and from not actually having the interaction in person. Additionally, bullies can have unlimited access to a teen through commenting and direct messaging, which can be much more overwhelming to teens than traditional in-person bullying.

Parental Controls

Facebook has a [Family Center feature](#),¹⁶ where teens can allow a parent or guardian to supervise their account. Some of the features include:

- Seeing how much time your teen has spent on the Facebook app each day for the last week, and their average daily time spent for the week;
- Setting scheduled breaks for your teen;
- Seeing your teen’s Facebook friends;
- Seeing some of your teen’s privacy settings and content preferences;
- Seeing the people and Pages your teen has blocked;
- Receiving push notifications if your teen changes any of these settings; and
- Allowing teens to see a preview of what you see while supervising and
- Choosing to notify you after reporting something on Facebook

Facebook also provides a [step-by-step guide](#)¹⁷ to show parents how to set up the Family Center feature. Importantly, parents or teens can remove supervision anytime and it’s automatically removed when the teen turns 18. Therefore, it is important that you discuss the Family Center feature with your teens and agree to the terms.

Additionally, Facebook provides [extensive safety resources](#)¹⁸ for parents and teens to facilitate conversations about online safety, teach teens how to react in certain situations, and explain certain features in-depth.

Messenger also provides a [Family Center feature](#),¹⁹ where teens can allow a parent or guardian to supervise their account. Some of the features include:

- Viewing how much time your teen spends on Messenger;
- Viewing and receiving updates on your teen’s Messenger contacts list, as well as their privacy and safety settings;
- Getting notified if your teen reports someone (if the teen chooses to share that information);
- Viewing who can message your teen (only their friends, friends of friends, or no one) and see if they change this setting; and
- Viewing who can see your teen’s Messenger stories and get notified if these settings change

¹⁶ *What is Supervision on Facebook?*, FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/help/1225862334926252/?helpref=related_articles (last visited May 10, 2024).

¹⁷ *Set up Supervision on Facebook*, FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/help/1381198796134370?helpref=related_articles (last visited May 10, 2024).

¹⁸ *Safety Resources for Parents*, FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/help/1079477105456277/?helpref=related_articles (last visited May 10, 2024).

¹⁹ *What Supervision is on Messenger*, MESSENGER, https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/2670515039753917/?helpref=related_articles (last visited May 10, 2024).

Note, you will not be able to see their chats, searches, or content not available to you. Messenger also provides a [step-by-step guide](#)²⁰ to show parents how to set up the Family Center feature. Importantly, parents or teens can remove supervision anytime and it's automatically removed when the teen turns 18. Therefore, it is important that you discuss the Family Center feature with your teens and agree to the terms.

Account Controls

Facebook provides a variety of [account settings](#)²¹ that allow teens to customize their account with certain safety features. In fact, Facebook provides a comprehensive [Privacy Checkup](#)²² which talks teens through what features are available to them and how to check the status of their features. Some of these features include:

- Customizing who can see certain information on your profile, like your phone number, email, birthday, and relationship status;
- Customizing who can see your past and future posts;
- Reviewing who you've blocked on Facebook and explaining what happens when you block someone; and
- Customizing how people can find you on Facebook, (specifically, who can send you friend requests and look you up on Facebook by phone number or email).

Messenger also has [privacy and safety features](#)²³ that teens can use to customize their account safety. Some of these features include:

- Updating [Messenger Contact Controls](#),²⁴ for example, choosing who can reach you (blocked profiles, hidden contacts, etc.); and
- [Blocking/reporting](#)²⁵ or [muting](#)²⁶ accounts.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Your Privacy*, FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/help/238318146535333/?helpref=hc_fnav (last visited May 10, 2024).

²² *Facebook Privacy Checkup*, FACEBOOK, https://www.facebook.com/help/443357099140264?helpref=about_content (last visited May 10, 2024).

²³ *Privacy and Safety on Messenger*, MESSENGER, https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/1064701417063145/?helpref=hc_fnav (last visited May 10, 2024).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Blocking, Reporting and Deleting*, MESSENGER, https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/1064701417063145/?helpref=hc_fnav (last visited May 10, 2024).

²⁶ *Turn Messenger Notifications on or off*, MESSENGER, <https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/330627630326605> (last visited May 10, 2024).

Device Features



Apple Devices

iPhone's have a [parental control feature](#)²⁷ with Content & Privacy Restrictions in Screen Time, which allows you to block or limit specific apps and features on your teen's device. You can also restrict the settings on your iPhone and iPad for explicit content, purchases and downloads, and privacy.

This is actually a very popular feature among college students and adults too if they need help staying focused in school or at work!



Androids & Chromebooks

For Androids and Chromebooks, [Google's Family Link feature](#)²⁸ provides a similar screen time limiting feature that Apple products do.

²⁷ *Use Parental Controls on Your Child's iPhone and iPad*, APPLE, <https://support.apple.com/en-us/105121> (last visited May 10, 2024).

²⁸ *Mange Your Child's Screen Time*, GOOGLE, <https://support.google.com/families/answer/7103340?hl=en#:~:text=When%20you%20create%20a%20Google.their%20Android%20device%20or%20Chromebook> (last visited May 10, 2024).

Final Thoughts

The world of social media can be overwhelming, and it can feel impossible to balance allowing teens the freedom to express themselves with keeping them safe. Unfortunately, social media companies place much of the burden on parents to learn and understand their products and ensure that their teens are being safe.

Luckily, there is pending [state](#)²⁹ and [federal](#)³⁰ legislation aiming to take some of this pressure off parents and place it on the social media companies through mandatory safety measures like heightened age verification measures, stronger default settings, harsher penalties for violations, etc. However, until this legislation is hopefully passed, teens are still at risk. Therefore, learning what resources are available to protect them is vital.

Hopefully this guide was helpful with not only understanding the risks of social media platforms and the safety resources available to you and your teen, but also helps start important conversations about what your teen is experiencing online, and how you and your community can best assist them.

²⁹ *Social Media and Children 2023 Legislation*, NAT'L CONF. OF STATE LEGISLATORS, <https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/social-media-and-children-2023-legislation> (Jan. 26, 2024).

³⁰ Protecting Kids on Social Media Act, S.1291, 118th Cong. (2024).