Parenting, Media, and Everything In Between

11 Social Media Red Flags Parents Should Know About

Find out which social media features are cause for concern -- no matter which app your kid is using.
By Christine Elgersma 9/24/2019

Topics: **Cyberbullying**, **Mental Health**, **Social Media**

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It can be hard to keep up with the latest apps that kids are using. Just when you've figured out how to talk to your kids about Instagram, they're begging to download Snapchat and TikTok. But here's the deal: Even when new apps come along, adding new features such as the ability to disappear or track your location, they're often not that different from other apps. And if you know what to look for, you can help your kid avoid some common social media pitfalls such as drama, cyberbullying, and oversharing.

Does a red flag mean your kid shouldn't use a particular app? Not at all. Most kids use social media apps safely -- and kids don't always use every feature of every app. Also, you can often disable certain features so they're no longer a problem. Finally, talking about using social media safely, responsibly, and respectfully is the best way to help your kid identify and avoid red flags. Here are the most common social media red flags, the apps they're found in, and tips for dealing with them.

Ads and in-app purchases. Some examples: Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat
Free apps have to get paid somehow, and many developers do it through advertising and providing purchase opportunities. Some track what you buy and show you targeted ads, and some even have targeted chats with businesses, which means your kid is invited into a chat with someone trying to sell a product.

- **What to do:** Know what's available in the app and set limits around purchases. Check out the types of ads coming at your kids, teach them to recognize all the kinds of digital marketing, and talk about what to do if they're approached online by someone trying to sell something.

Age-inappropriate content. Some examples: Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat
Friends can share explicit stuff via messaging (for example, sexting), but the bigger concern is whether an app features a lot of user-generated content that isn't appropriate to your kid's age. Your teen may not even need to follow users who are posting explicit stuff to come across it.

- **What to do:** Ask your kid whom she follows, and ask to see what's being posted. Use the app yourself and get a sense of what comes up in an average feed (or features like Snapchat Discover). Then try searching for content you're concerned about and see how easy it is to find. Check the terms of use to see what the app allows and whether users can flag violators.

Anonymity. Some examples: Yolo, Whisper, Lipsi
Anonymity doesn't always breed cruelty, but it often does. On anonymous sites, people feel that their comments are consequence-free -- and end up hurting others. Also, though kids may feel safe enough to share sensitive or painful things they might not otherwise, they often don't get the necessary support or help -- and may get attacked.

- **What to do:** Make sure your teen understands the risks involved and that they know how to block and report other users if necessary. Also, if they need connection but it's hard to talk about a problem (especially with you), give them opportunities to share with other safe, trusted people.

Cyberbullying. Some examples: Instagram, Snapchat, Roblox, Twitter
Though many apps have improved their monitoring and reporting features, cyberbullying is still a reality. It can happen on any social media app, but some have a notorious mean streak. If an app allows anonymous posting and is used in schools, chances are some teens will abuse it.

- **What to do:** Ask around and pay attention to what parents, teachers, and other kids say about it to get a sense if it's stirring up trouble. Make sure your teen understands how to report and block other users, and check the school's policy about cyberbullying.

Location tracking and sharing. Some examples: Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram
Wherever you go, there you are -- and your social media apps know it. Though you may only indicate a city or neighborhood in a profile, allowing location identification often means that you're tracked within a city block, and your posts can include your location.

- **What to do:** Turn off location settings on the phone AND in the app; check to see whether previous posts include location information, and delete it.

Public default settings. Some examples: Instagram, TikTok, Twitter
Many apps allow a user to have a public or private profile, only shared with friends; however, some apps are public by default, which means that a kid's name, picture, and posts are available to everyone.

- **What to do:** As soon as you download the app, go into the settings to check the defaults. If a kid is using the same program on a browser, check there, too.

Random video chat. Some examples: HOLLA: live random video chat, Monkey, ChatLive, Random Video Chat
Any app that's inviting kids to "meet new friends" is facilitating chats with strangers in some way. In most cases this type of app likely has a lot of sexual content and adults trying to hook up.

- **What to do:** If your teen is truly trying to meet new friends, it might be best to start on an app that's interest-based with text-based group forums so they can find their people.

Real-time video streaming. Some examples: YouNow, Instagram, Twitch
Live streaming is just that -- live -- so it's very easy to share something you didn't mean to. Kids may use these apps in private (such as in their bedrooms) and inadvertently share personal information without knowing exactly who is watching. Though they may seem temporary, embarrassing or mean moments are easily captured and shared later.

- **What to do:** Talk to your kids about why they want to share video of themselves and what they should and shouldn't share. Talk about positive, constructive uses of video sharing, such as creating shorts using editing programs or creating an interest-based channel to funnel your teen's creativity.

Secret chat rooms. Some examples: Discord, IMVU
Chat rooms can be invitation-only or drop-in. Both carry some risks because chat rooms allow for no-holds-barred conversations. Sometimes the chats are private for reasons like sexual content or hate speech. But sometimes kids create private groups to avoid the problems associated with public groups. Either way, chat rooms make it more difficult for parents to keep track of what their kids are doing online.

- **What to do:** If your kid is creating or using a private chat room with friends to safeguard against strangers, that's OK, but they should tell you before they join a private chat so you can check it out first. In general, kids should be very cautious about joining chat rooms and be on the alert for predatory behavior.

"Temporary" pictures and videos. Some examples: Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, Confide
Nothing shared between devices is truly temporary, even when an app builds its whole marketing around it.

Compromising pictures and texts get kids in real trouble because they believe what they're sending is private and will disappear.

- **What to do:** Let your kids know that nothing they send is truly temporary, and it's easy for others to share what you've sent. Because it's often hard for kids to really consider consequences, and they might think it won't happen to them, it might be worth sharing some facts about kids getting in legal trouble because of "disappearing" pictures.

Toxic culture. Some examples: 4Chan, 8Chan, Discord, Twitch
Some sites and apps attract trolls and other confrontational types who want a place to express extreme views in an in-your-face way. Kids can be drawn to this provocative communication style and see it as a place to belong -- especially if they feel persecuted in other parts of their lives, -- but the interactions are often laced with bullying, sexism, hate speech, and other cruelties that can escalate quickly.

- **What to do:** Toxic culture can really do a number on kids' self-esteem, and when they get involved in a negative environment, they tend to spread it around. Find out why your kid wants to use certain platforms, and then make sure they know how to report and deflect negativity.

About Christine Elgersma

Christine Elgersma wrangles learning and social media app reviews and creates parent talks as Senior Editor, Parent Education. Before coming to Common Sense, she helped cultivate and create ELA curriculum for a K-12 app... Read more

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Comments (2)

Kid, 12 years old April 14, 2019

Don't make your kid turn on private setting on most social media, or try to scare them with to many social media horror stories. Just have them use usernames which don't include your name, and only tell them obvious things like don't meet up with someone you met online.

Adult written by Jsivaches

February 26, 2016

I only have one thing to say about the first one; the way it's written it sounds like you're telling people to flag anything they don't deem "appropriate". I can't say what I think about that idea without cursing so I'll just say this; don't. Be a real parent and tell your kid no or to unfollow that person instead of teaching them to take down anything they don't like. We don't need a social media version of youtubes terrible copyright abuse. Only flag or report if the post is actually breaking the website rules or the general laws.