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## Parenting, Media, and Everything In Between

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### Help! My Kid Wants to Use Social Media

Get your kid -- and yourself -- ready for the next step with these conversation starters.

By [Christine Elgersma](#) 10/3/2019

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Topics: [Cellphone Parenting](#), [Social Media](#)

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After months of asking, you took the plunge, and now your kid has a phone. Inevitably, soon after the smartphone [comes social media](#) (insert parental scream). For most parents, [social media](#) feels scary when they think about their kids using it. Why is it such a potential pit of despair for parents?

First, we know from our own social media that the [experience isn't always great](#). How are kids supposed to deal with insensitive posts, sketchy people, privacy problems, and even FOMO -- when supposedly mature grown-ups can't even be trusted to behave appropriately? And, though most social media has a minimum age of 13, a lot of kids start asking for it [before they're technically allowed to join](#).

Of course we're worried. But the truth is, [lots of teens use social media and stay safe, healthy, and connected](#) -- especially when parents are supportive. And if we set our teens up for success, keep lines of communication open, and stay aware of our teen's social media world, any trouble they run into will likely be speed bumps instead of roadblocks.

So, how do we do that? Talking -- and listening -- is key. Yes, it can be hard to get kids to open up, but it's possible to get more information about what they want to use, why they want to use it, and how much they know about potential risks without seeming intrusive. And it's important, too, not just for their social lives but for the future. The world runs on social media. And kids need to learn how to use it safely, responsibly, and respectfully. Today it might be [Snapchat](#), but tomorrow they may be looking for a job on [LinkedIn](#) or sharing a professional portfolio on their website.

Below are some ideas for how to kick things off; it's best to find some downtime when you're not pulling your kid away from something they love. If you need buy-in, frame it like a driving test: They need to know the rules of the road before they can get in the car. They might know much more than you think, so make sure to let them show their expertise when possible. You can go through the script as-is or use it as a jumping-off point -- whatever works!

**Ask your teen:** What app(s) do you want to use and why?

**Best answers:**

- I really want [Snapchat](#) because all of my friends use it and it's really fun. And I want [TikTok](#) because some of the videos are really hilarious.
- Instagram is cool because I can follow my favorite celebrities and message friends in one place.
- Our whole family is on Facebook, so I want to keep in touch with them, but I also want a [WhatsApp account](#) because it doesn't use data.

**Follow-up:** Is there anything in that app that isn't awesome? Anything you think I'd be worried about?

**Best answers:**

- Yeah, all social media has some bad stuff in it. People post weird things and can be mean, but I don't want to use it for that. I just want to have fun with my friends.
- Well, I guess so. Probably like [cyberbullying](#) and [strangers](#) and stuff. But I know how to use the settings, so I'm not worried. I'll show you ...
- Probably, but I promise to tell you if something bad is happening or if I see something that's upsetting.

**Takeaways:**

When teens are saying they want to use social media to stay connected to friends, that's a good sign. If their answer is more along the lines of trying to [get famous](#) or "showing off" in some way, it's more problematic -- and could lead to risky behavior in their search for online fame. Also, it matters which platforms your kid wants to use, since each one comes with its own sets of features and challenges. [MeetMe](#) and [Yubo](#), for example, come with

more potential risks than say, [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), which aren't designed to meet strangers and use algorithms and settings to help filter out abusive comments.

**Ask your teen:** What kinds of communication don't belong on social media?

**Best answers:**

- If I'm in a fight with someone, it's not going to get solved over text or social media -- we just need to [actually talk](#).
- People really shouldn't post or share sexy stuff because it can end up all over the place, and that would be super embarrassing. Also [posting private information](#), like my phone number, would be stupid.
- Sometimes people say really cruel things, even about race or being gay. I think it can feel too easy, and people act dumb when they [don't have to look someone in the eyes](#).

**Follow-up:** What if your friend [posts a sexy picture or video](#)? Would it be hard to not do it, too? If she got positive comments, how would that feel?

**Best answers:**

- Some of my friends do post stuff like that, and I feel kind of embarrassed for them. I've even told them to take stuff down. But it doesn't make me want to do it because I don't want to invite people to comment on my body.
- I guess it would be weird to see that, and I might feel like I have to like the post so she doesn't feel bad, but with all of the filters and [selfie-improvement apps](#) like [Facetune](#), it's not real anyway.
- I might be a little jealous if she got lots of nice comments, but I'd rather get nice comments for other things, like winning a soccer game or writing a cool story.

**Follow-up:** So, in general, what do you think are [good things to keep in mind](#) before you post something?

**Best answers:**

- Mostly that everything online is permanent and could be shared, so I should really think about how I would feel if something I thought was private went public and then decide to post or not.
- If something I post would make someone mad or upset, then I shouldn't do it. That's why I'd always ask my friends before I post pictures of them anywhere.
- I might forget sometimes, but I think it will help to imagine if my future self would want [a college admissions person](#) or Grandma or even you to see something dumb I posted without thinking. Even just waiting a few seconds to think first would probably help.

**Takeaways:** It's good for teens to think about why they want to post something, who they're posting it for, and what expectations they might have about the reactions they'll get. It's normal for teens to [seek out attention](#) and explore their sexuality, but doing it on social media is risky. Thinking about consequences isn't a teen's strongest skill because of brain development, but if they can pause for a few seconds to think about why they're posting something and what the impact might be, it might help prevent problems. They'll still make mistakes, but a little mindfulness goes a long way.

**Ask your teen:** Do you know what to do if someone is mean, [harasses you for pictures](#), stalks you, or does anything else that feels sketchy?

**Best answers:**

- Some of it is not posting sketchy or mean stuff yourself, but it also helps to know [how to use the settings](#) and how to report and block people.
- I [wouldn't respond to that person](#) because I've seen people get into flame wars and really get crazy and I don't want all of that drama!
- I'd block and report that person and tell you about it, especially if the person won't stop.

**Follow-up:** Can you walk me through the way your favorite app works and [what the settings are](#)?

**Best answers:**

- Sure. The [biggest thing with Snapchat](#) is keeping this setting to "Friends" so random people can't contact me. I'd also make sure to use Ghost Mode on this map ...
- I'd start with a [private account on Instagram](#), but the default is public, so here's where you change it. And then if someone is mean, here's how to block them ...
- I really want a [public TikTok account](#), but you probably won't let me, so here's where you make an account private ...

**Takeaways:** You and your teen need to understand the app they're using in terms of who can see their posts, who can friend/contact them, and how to use the settings to be as safe as possible. This is a good time to download their favorite app, have your kid walk you through how to use it, and take a look at the settings together.

**Ask your teen:** What might [bum you out about social media](#), and what can you do about it?

**Best answers:**

- I think it would make me sad if I saw pictures of a party I wasn't invited to, but I guess I would just talk to that person face-to-face about how I felt.
- Sometimes people look like they're always having the best time and always happy, and if I'm not feeling like that, it's kind of depressing. I'd try to remember that what people post on social media isn't what their whole life is like, and I could [just do something else](#) that makes me feel good about myself.
- I think if I posted something and no one liked it, I'd be bummed. I think it would help to talk to you if it happened a lot and also to remember that [my posts on social media aren't the whole me](#) -- not getting likes doesn't mean people don't like me.

**Follow-up:** What do you think we should do if one or both of us notice that being on social media is starting to make you anxious or depressed, or take up too much time?

**Best answers:**

- Since you don't let me use my phone at dinner or at bedtime, I don't think I'd be using it too much, but I guess I could [take a break](#) from it if it stopped being fun.
- I have some friends who are all [about their Snapstreaks](#), so I could see how that might feel important to me, but if it started to feel like pressure, I guess I'd talk to my friend so we could agree together to take a break.
- I know sometimes I get mad when you try to talk to me about stuff, so I don't think it would help if you threaten to take my phone away or anything. But if you [notice I'm depressed](#) and I don't see it, maybe you can just tell me gently and we can do something fun together to take a break and then talk.

**Follow-up:** What should our limits be around [how much and how often](#) you're using social media?

#### Best answers:

- I guess we can just add it to our [Family Media Agreement](#) so I won't use it during class, dinner, or when I go to bed. And if I'm totally obsessed and not paying attention to anything else, I'd want you to tell me.
- If my grades go down or I stop doing other activities, then I think that's a problem.
- You know how sometimes I'm trying to talk to you while you're on Facebook and you're not really listening? Let's agree that we both won't do that.

**Takeaways:** It's helpful to set expectations before downloading the app and turning your kid loose. When is it time to stop? Are there places and times when the phone is off-limits? What are the consequences when your kid doesn't abide by the expectations? Setting these up together gets you more buy-in and less arguing when they make inevitable mistakes. It's also important to talk about the up and downsides of social media and how it sometimes [can make people feel pressured or less-than](#). How much a person uses social media seems to be a factor when it comes to how someone feels, so discussing that up front sets the stage for future conversations if and when your [teen isn't having fun anymore](#). Finally, being a good role model is key, especially because your teen won't listen to you if you aren't walking the walk. If you're struggling with your own use of social media, be open about it and work as a team to find balance.

**Ask your teen:** The deal is that I am going to do random spot-checks of your phone, and I'll need your social media usernames and passwords. My goal is not to spy on you or keep track of everything you do -- [just to stay involved](#). Think you can handle that?

#### Best answers:

- That seems fair. I know you're paying for the phone, so I get that you should be able to have access. Also, I've had friends who wanted their parents' help with stuff on social media but didn't know how to ask, so it's probably good if you know what's going on.
- I mean, I need some privacy, but I get that you're not going to read every single text I send. Maybe we can agree that you'll only sit me down to talk to me about really bad stuff and not, like, swearing or gross memes.
- I don't like it, but if that's what it takes, that's fine. It'll probably help me stop and think about what I'm posting if I know that you might see it.

**Takeaways:** There's some evidence that [trying to track everything your kid does backfires](#): Kids create secret accounts and stop talking openly about what's happening because they feel spied on. To avoid this, it's important to frame your checks as a form of training wheels; you're doing it to support them, not call them out. Of course, if

they break a rule you've set, consequences are appropriate, but in general, it [works best to use each mistake as a teachable moment](#). Remember, too, that kids sometimes do have multiple accounts (especially on Instagram) and that there's not always a feed to check (like on Snapchat), so sitting down and asking to see what's happening -- instead of checking solo -- might also open up some conversations.

**Ask your teen:** Will you please share some fun stuff with me so I don't feel so old and we can have fun together?

**Best answers:**

- Yes!
- Sure!
- Totally!

**Takeaways:** Many of these apps have cool features you can share and conversation-sparking content that offers something that's not always easy to find: connection with your teen. Meet them where they are, have ongoing conversations, stay involved, and have fun when possible!

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### [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 (9)

**Kid, 9 years old** October 14, 2019

I think you shouldn't check your kids social media. Maximum friend them, but knowing their passwords is too far. Just my opinion.

**Kid, 12 years old** October 22, 2019

I agree.

**Adult** written by [Fantastic4](#)

December 28, 2018

I'm always step forward when it comes to my children using social media accounts. I have 16 years old daughter. we have an open conversation about using those accounts, but you can't trust the other site (the guys that she's chatting with), so very often I check them... I use socialnetworkfinder.com to find out who is behind a certain profile... maybe it's not right, but I just want to make sure that she is safe.

**Parent of a 12 year old** written by [Martin N.](#)

August 13, 2018

my advices if you are not techs savvy its time to change and learn about smart phones and the net then discus the different platforms snap chat facebook twitter linked in pick somewhere that is fun ie facebook create a profile yourself ad friends or family second set rules no friend requests outside of school do not post anything nasty and have fun

**Adult** written by [InfernoFire](#)

July 14, 2018

Just because you are having an argument with someone, it doesnt mean it can't be sorted out in text. I find that I communicate better through the written word because I have a speech disability and I use text to sort things out

**Adult** written by [SamanthaD9](#)

July 16, 2018

Very true! I've fostered kids with severe social anxiety and autism and they find it extremely hard to resolve conflicts face-to-face due to stress and speech impediments.

**Parent of a 6, 11, and 14 year old** written by [jlattie](#)

July 13, 2018

The content on Instagram and Snapchat is highly sexual. I wouldn't recommend allowing your teen to access Instagram or Snapchat unless it's in a family room where parents and adults can see the content. Just because the setting is private doesn't mean they can't search on inappropriate content for teenagers. My 1st son had access at 13 yrs old, however, I am having 2nd thoughts allowing my children to access social media until 16 rs old. We use "our pact" to control the settings and not allow it hours of the day.

**Parent of a 12 year old** written by [Anonymous\\_bee](#)

July 23, 2018

That is not true. If your child is frequently searching this stuff however, it is more likely to appear on his feed. Think about the cause before you jump to conclusions.

**Parent of a 13 year old** written by [vinegarchick](#)

July 13, 2018

Thank you for this article. It's true the only way kids will learn how to use social media is to use it. We are just delving into this aspect of teen life. Scary, but we know continual active communication is key. As parents we need to educate ourselves o these apps and not stick our heads in the sand. Teens have their network of friends parents need Common Sense Media as our network of 'friends'.

