

# Oh, Snapchat! Why teens love it; what parents need to know

Parents, if your child has a smartphone, it's very likely that he has also started using Snapchat, a social media app that allows the user to send photos and videos to a select group of friends. The function works in a here-now, gone-in-seconds format – the user views the photo, and then it disappears 10 seconds later.

Snapchat does have a replay feature, and there are ways to recover Snapchats, which are actually stored on the user's phone. The receiver can also take a screenshot of anything that seems worth saving, and when that happens, Snapchat sends a message to the sender that a screenshot has been taken.

Teenagers say they like the app because it's fast and visual, unlike texting. It's basically instant messaging, except with perishable photos. There's also the security of knowing that no matter how ridiculous your Snapchat message was, you won't live to regret it, they said. (which is a false security) A typical Snapchat is just a selfie, often with a message written on it.

Another popular instant messaging platforms include Instagram (or Instagram Direct). As with all social media, Snapchat has the potential to be used inappropriately. And if someone knows your child's Snapchat handle, that person can send him a message, even if he's not part of your child's circle of Snapchat friends.

Should parents be concerned?

Emphatically, yes, said Tommy Loftis, a law enforcement coordinator and public information officer for the U.S. Attorney's office in the Southern District of Alabama, who frequently gives presentations on Internet safety to students, teachers and parents.

“The biggest concern with kids and social media nowadays is, they're so tech-savvy, but they don't necessarily think of the implications down the road,” he said. “They believe with all their heart that once they send a Snapchat, it's gone forever, but we're finding that isn't the case.”

The Snapchat website has a guide for parents that describes acceptable use – no one under age 13 should be on Snapchat, just for starters – and also offers advice about how to handle concerns about privacy.

In his presentations, Loftis, urges parents to check their children's phones and be knowledgeable about their social media accounts. "I am guesstimating that more than half of the parents don't regularly check their children's phones to see that they're doing," he said. "Most parents don't have a clue" what kids are looking at and downloading on their smartphones, he believes.

He likes to ask parents: Do you want to discover what your child has been putting on the Internet for years when you're sitting in front of a college admissions officer and he's now telling you they're denying your child's scholarship because of what they've found on the Internet?

It's a tough sell to impulsive teens, but Loftis tries to get them to understand that being careful with social media isn't just about making good decisions now; it could affect their careers later.

"Anything that you put on the Internet, and I don't care what platform you're using – Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook – anything that you put on the Internet, you have to be prepared to eat later," he said. "When you hit the send button, you have lost control of it."

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