

Instagram – A parent's guide to Instagram

Is Instagram safe? How does it work? And what's a "finsta"? Everything parents need to know about this popular image-sharing app.

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a popular, free social networking app that lets users post photos and videos, follow celebrities and friends, and send messages. It's owned by Facebook but has a photo-forward format that's more appealing to teens.

How does Instagram work?

Once you create an account, you get your feed going by following friends and celebrities (Instagram helpfully suggests some for you). When you're ready to share your first post, tap the plus sign and select Library, Photo, or Video. Depending on the media type you're sharing, you can choose from all sorts of filters and image-editing tools to make your post look cool. Then you add a caption and a hashtag if you wish (which categorizes all posts on the same topic together). You get the option of adding a location to your post, but it's not recommended that children and teens use this function. Instagram offers a lot more features, too including:

- **Direct messages (DMs).** You can send direct messages to one or more people -- including people you don't follow and who don't follow you. (The website version of Instagram doesn't support DMs.)
- **Disappearing messages.** This is a Snapchat-like feature that lets you send timed photo or video messages that recipients can only view once before they disappear.
- **Stories.** These are 15-second videos or slideshows that live in a circle separate from other posts. To create one, tap Your Story, decide what kind of post you want to create -- text, photo slideshow, video, or livestream -- and select the Story Controls to limit the audience, restrict message replies, and allow sharing.
- **Instagram TV (IGTV).** These are longer-form videos programmed by Instagram (i.e., they're not by your friends or followers). Children can also create their own IGTV channels and broadcast themselves, sort of like on YouTube.

How old should children be to use Instagram?

According to the terms of service, you have to be 13, but there's no age-verification process, so it's very easy for children under 13 to sign up. CCHSG rates Instagram for age 15 and up because of mature content, access to strangers, marketing ploys, and data collection. Check out our social media rules for high schoolers.

What kinds of content will my child see on Instagram?

The kinds of content children will see mostly depends on whom they follow: If they only follow friends and don't search for anything, they may see only pictures of their friends having fun. But children rarely limit their feeds to people they know, so it's likely they'll see mature content (including sexy stuff, swearing, and substance use), mean or sexual comments, and hashtags about suicide, anorexia, and other concerning topics. If they follow celebrities, they'll probably also see marketing.

How can I monitor my child's activity on Instagram?

You can ask your child to give you a tour of their Insta. Ask them to walk you through their account, explain memes and comments, discuss friends, and share whatever comes up. Or try one of these ideas:

- **Create your own Instagram account and follow your child.** You'll see what they post (unless they block you), but you won't see their DMs (direct messages).
- **Follow their friends.** It's not unusual for parents to be friends with their children's friends online (but you should hold back on comments). If you're close with your children's friends, you can follow each other and keep tabs on your child's doings.
- **Ask for your child's Instagram username and password.** Then, you can log in as them and review their accounts.
- **Do spot checks.** Either random or scheduled, these check-ins give you time to sit down together and go through your child's feed.
- **Install a third-party monitoring app.** Parental controls such as Bark give you a lot of visibility into what children are doing online. Learn more about parental controls.

What's the deal with "rinstas" and "finstas"?

Rinstas and finstas are second (or third) Instagram accounts that are completely separate from each other. Finsta stands for "fake Instagram," and these accounts reflect a child's true self and is only meant for very close friends to see. Rinsta is a child's "real" Instagram that's public-facing and highly curated, and they project the type of ideal online persona that's hard to achieve in reality. In other words, their "real" account is the public one everyone can find and see. Not every child maintains more than one account, but don't be alarmed if your child does. As long as they follow responsible social media practices such as using privacy settings, not posting things they'll regret, and limiting their audience, finstas and rinstas can be useful tools as children go through the natural process of figuring out their identities.

To see if your child has more than one account, you'll need access to their phone. Then tap the person icon and the arrow next to your child's username. If they have another account, you'll see it there. Another option is to stay logged in to their account(s) on your device so you can see all their activity. While you're at it, it's a good idea to make sure your child's account names don't contain their age: Lots of children include their ages in their handles, but that can make them a target. Also, although much rarer, check to make sure your child didn't create an account that's meant for a business. You'll know if the account information contains a phone number and email address.

Is there any way to limit or restrict my child's activity on Instagram, including connecting with strangers?

Instagram accounts are public by default, so the first setting to change is to make it private. To do this, go to Settings from your profile page. Select Privacy and Security, then Account Privacy, and toggle on Private Account. With a private account, only people you approve can see what you post. You get a lot of options in the Privacy and Security section -- and you should spend some time here if you're helping your child set up their first account. You can't lock Privacy and Security settings, though, so be aware that children can change them back. A few more key settings in Privacy and Security:

- **Comment controls.** You can limit comments to followers, block comments from specific people, hide "offensive" comments, and create specific filters for words and phrases.
- **Re-sharing to stories.** You can control whether or not other people can re-share your posts.
- **Photos and videos.** You can prevent people from automatically adding pictures of you to your profile without your approval and hide photos and videos so they don't display in your feed.

How can my child block or report other users on Instagram?

Next to each person's account, there are three dots. When you tap on them, you see options to block, report, or mute that person. You can also use the Restrict option to screen someone's comments without them knowing. Also, if a comment seems to be offensive, the bully may get an alert that asks, "Are you sure you want to post this?" which may make them think twice. If a bully is really determined, however, it's not hard for them to create a new account and start all over. Sometimes children even make "hate pages" that are created to make fun of specific people or create accounts in someone else's name acting as an impostor. You can report those accounts, too, but since it can turn into a game of whack-a-mole -- and Instagram is notoriously unresponsive to reporting -- it's not always enough to rely on these features. Teach your children when and how to use blocking and reporting (and make sure they know that they'll remain anonymous). If you can't get rid of a bully, you may need more support from the school or other parents.

What should I do if it seems like my child can't stop looking at Instagram?

Within the app, there's a feature called Your Activity, which is designed to make people more aware of the time they're spending in the app and prompt them to curb their use if they feel it's getting to be too much. Your Activity shows how much time you've spent using the app in the past few days, lets you set a time limit and get a reminder to stop, and gives access to your notification controls. This can be a useful tool for children if they've mastered self-regulation, but for children who need more help on that path, you can try device-based controls like Screen Time on iOS or the Family Link app on Android to block access and set time limits on apps. Another trick is to adjust or turn off notifications completely to calm the need to check every few minutes. And if children are constantly scrolling, they'll reach the "You're all caught up!" message that tells them there's no new content to see since the last time they checked.

What are some other risks associated with children using Instagram?

Because Instagram is so image-based, there definitely can be a focus on perfection, image, and status. It's not uncommon for some users to take lots of selfies to choose the "perfect" one and delete posts that don't get a certain number of likes. And with so many filters and celebrities and posts of people having fun, it can definitely affect a teen's body image and sense of self. Some people even take risks to get the perfect shot, all for Instagram. To keep up, teens may post sexy pictures or reveal too much personal information. The effects of "influencers" are real, so knowing whom your child follows and why might give you insight into who they admire and what products that person might be pushing (note that there's often a way to buy right from the app). As with any other social media app that includes likes and follows, some teens use those as a measuring stick and compare themselves to others. If your child's activity on the app takes a turn from connection and fun to perfection and anxiety, it's time to take a break. Using it to scroll through other people's fabulous photos for long stretches every day without using it to joke with friends or send messages can make teens feel worse than when they opened the app.

Are there any potential benefits to my child using Instagram?

If it's used positively, Instagram is a place children go to connect with friends, a bit like passing virtual notes with lots of bells and whistles and paging through entertainment magazines. Teens also use it to be creative, posting art, poetry, and videos that showcase their talents. When used in balance with other activities and with purpose (not just endless, mindless scrolling), children can come away from the app feeling connected and positive.

If you decide to let your teen use Instagram, there are some steps you can take to help them get the most positives and fewest negatives. You can sit down and go through the app and its settings with them, note your concerns, lay out the expectations and potential consequences, talk through whatever controls you might use (including spot checks), and set boundaries around when, where, how, and whom they can communicate with to get off to a solid start.

Information on this page has been adapted from:

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By Christine Elgersma 01/03/2020

<https://www.common sense media.org/blog/parents-ultimate-guide-to-instagram>