

Snapchat – A parent’s guide to Snapchat

Is Snapchat safe for children? How does it work? And what's with Snapstreaks? Everything curious parents need to know about this ultra-popular app.

What is Snapchat?

Snapchat is a popular messaging app that lets users exchange pictures and videos (called snaps) that are meant to disappear after they're viewed. It's advertised as a "new type of camera" because the essential function is to take a picture or video, add filters, lenses, or other effects and share them with friends.

How does Snapchat work?

All you need to sign up is your name, an email address, and your birth date. On Snapchat, users go by a handle, and Snapchatters gravitate toward silly names. To add friends, you can upload your contacts or search for people you know. You can also automatically add someone by taking a picture of their "Snapcode," a special QR code unique to each user. After that, things get a little confusing. On Snapchat, photos -- not text -- usually start the communication. To begin a conversation, you tap the big camera circle and take a snap. There are all sorts of photo-editing tools (you have to experiment to figure out what they do) as well as filters to adorn your images. Once you customize your snap, you can send it to anyone in your friends list or add it to your story, which is a record of the day that your friends can view for 24 hours. In addition to individual texting, Snapchat also offers group texting and group stories that everyone in a group can contribute to. You can delete the text messages you send, though in a group chat the other people will see that you've deleted something. In terms of Snaps, you can delete unopened ones that use a saved picture (not taken on the spot). Snaps that include pictures you just took (and didn't save) aren't possible to delete.

How old do you have to be to use Snapchat?

According to the terms of service, users must be 13. You have to enter your birth date to set up an account, but there's no age verification, so it's easy for children under 13 to sign up. CCHSG rates Snapchat OK for teens 16 and up, mainly because of the exposure to age-inappropriate content and the marketing ploys, such as quizzes, that collect data.

Do messages really disappear on Snapchat?

It depends. If you set a time limit on a snap, it will disappear after it's viewed. However, recipients can take a screenshot of an image using their phones or a third-party screen-capture app. A phone screen-capture will notify the sender that the image was captured. But third-party apps don't trigger a notification. For these reasons, it's best that teens understand that nothing done online is really temporary. Before sending a sexy or embarrassing snap of themselves or someone else, it's important to remember that the picture could circulate the school by tomorrow morning.

What are Snapstreaks?

With a Snapstreaks, two users have snapped back and forth within a 24-hour period for three days in a row. Once you've established a streak, special emojis and statistics display next to the streakers' names to show you how long you've maintained a streak. Why do they matter? For one thing, they add to your overall Snapchat score (basically a number that reflects how much you use the app). For another, they can occasionally become the most important thing in a child's life. Because of the intense bonds children can form over social media, they can feel that a Snapstreak is a measure of their friendship, and if they don't keep it up they'll let the other person down. Teens have even been known to give friends access to their

Snapchat accounts to keep a streak going if they can't do it themselves (for example, if their phone gets taken away for being online too much). This can lead to feelings of pressure, anxiety, and compulsion, so it's good to know if your child has streaks going to get a window into why that selfie might feel really important.

What's Snap Map?

Snap Map displays your location on a map in real time. Only your Snapchat friends can see where you are. If your friends have opted into Snap Map, you can see their locations, too. (You can turn this off or use it in Ghost Mode, which allows you to see the map but not be seen by others.) Snap Map also features news and events from around the world -- for example, a political rally in Nicaragua, which displays as an icon on a map of the world. The biggest risk with Snap Map is a teen having their location seen by all their friends -- since some of their Snapchat contacts may not be real friends. Unless there's a specific event and it makes it easier for friends to know each other's location, it's best to leave Snap Maps off or use it in Ghost Mode.

What's a Snapchat story?

A story is a collection of moments in the form of pictures and videos that, taken together, create a narrative. (After Snapchat popularized the format, other social media services, including Facebook and Instagram, offered story-creation tools, too.) On Snapchat, stories appear as circles, and when you tap them, they autoplay the pictures or videos the user collected. You can create personal stories that your friends can view for a 24-hour period. Or, if you think your Snap is particularly interesting or newsworthy, you can send it to Our Story. Our Stories are kind of like mini-documentaries of events, holidays, game championships, or other things happening in the world on a particular day. Snaps are curated and compiled by the company. While it's cool to have your story added to Our Story, it's also very public, so children should think carefully before submitting one.

What's a Snapcode?

When you sign up, Snapchat gives you your own unique QR code. When you meet a fellow Snapchat user and want to friend each other, you can just take a snap of the other person's code, and they're automatically added to your friends list. Because it's so easy to find friends on Snapchat (depending on your settings) or exchange codes, teens may end up with virtual strangers on their friends list. For a variety of reasons, that can be risky, so it's best to talk to your teen about when it's safe to add people.

What's Discover?

Discover offers content created by celebrities, news and entertainment outlets, and other users. You can subscribe to specific Discover sources to receive their feeds. While Discover offers some legitimate news from publishers including the New York Times and Vice Media, the offerings can be promotional and are frequently mature. But if your child has signed up with their correct birth date, they'll miss the alcohol ads and other adult content that Snapchat filters out for underage users. Discover stories often feature promos prompting children to "swipe up" to learn more (which usually leads to ads) or take a quiz (which is usually a marketing tool). This section runs the gamut from harmless to shocking, so it's good to look around and get a sense of what your children are seeing.

What are Snapchat's other features?

Snapchat is waaaay more than cute photos. The more you use the app, the more points you get and the higher your Snapchat score goes. Snapchat awards high scorers with trophies and other perks. Here are a few other Snapchat features:

- **Face lenses and world lenses:** If you've seen photos of people with cartoon cat ears and whiskers on their faces, those are face lenses. World lenses are augmented reality elements, such as rainbows, that you can add to a snap so it looks like it's part of the photo. Technically, lenses are "overlays" -- and they cost money on Snapchat.
- **Geo-filters:** These are location-specific elements that can only be unlocked by visiting a specific place. Businesses use geo-filters as a way for customers to check in and advertise them. A child could create a special geo-filter for their sweet-16 party for attendees to add to their photos.
- **Snapcash:** Like PayPal or Venmo, Snapcash lets users transfer money to each other.
- **Memories:** If you don't want your snaps to disappear, you can store them to send later. My Eyes Only is a way to save Memories behind a passcode so that no one else can see them.
- **Snapstore:** This is exactly what it sounds like: a place to buy Snapchat-related items.
- **Shazam:** A feature that helps you identify a song.
- **Snap Games:** Co-play games with voice/text chat and ads, launched from the chat section to play with friends.
- **Snap Originals:** Shows created by Snapchat with a wide range of formats from docuseries to pop culture, made in partnership with platforms like BuzzFeed.

Is Snapchat safe for tweens and teens?

Most children use Snapchat to goof around and stay in contact with their friends -- end of story. Yes, there's some mature content, but it's appropriate for most teens 16 and up. That said, there are three key risky areas:

The myth of disappearing messages. When Snapchat first started, it was labeled "the sexting app" because people sent intimate photos, assuming they'd self-destruct. Any app can be misused, but a lot of children mistakenly believe that Snapchat has a built-in Get Out of Jail Free card. Teens really need to understand that the content they share can be saved and shared and may never go away. It's best to have this conversation before they download Snapchat, but it's never too late. Talk about whether any of their friends have ever pressured them to send a sexy image and discuss why someone who would do that does not have your best interests at heart. Children should also ask permission before sharing a picture of someone else.

The time suck. Snapchat is a ton of fun to use, and there's lots to discover on it. Snapstreaks and stories add a time-pressure element that makes children feel like they have to check in. If it ever seems like your child is stressing and not using the app for fun, it's time to step in.

Privacy and safety. Since it's so easy to add friends in Snapchat, you can end up with lots of people you don't know well on your friends list. And depending on your settings, the app can collect a ton of data about your habits in, and outside of, the app. Snapchat also works with a lot of third parties that they share your data with.

How do I monitor Snapchat and use the settings?

The biggest challenge for parents is that there's no way to see your child's activity in the app in the same way as on other social media platforms. Since there's no feed to scroll, there's not much to monitor. Instead, focus on the privacy settings. If you decide to say yes to Snapchat, sit down with your child and together go into the app's settings (the little gear icon next to your profile image). Scroll down to "Who Can..." This is where you can control important safety features such as who can see your location and who can view your story. This is a perfect time to talk to your child about using their Snapchat account safely and responsibly. Discuss when and how often you'll check in on how they're using it and how they're

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feeling about it. Explain that you understand that social media is important to them, and, at the same time, your role is to protect them. Don't forget to ask your child to show you some of their snaps and some of the cool features they like in the app. That'll make it a little less scary for you -- and send the message that you're on the same team.

Information on this page has been adapted from:

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