

We're committed to supporting families and educators during the coronavirus pandemic. That's why we're sharing our Common Sense Media Plus advice related to the coronavirus with our entire Common Sense community. [Learn more about Plus](#)

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## Who's my kid talking to online?

While we're sheltering in place, the fact that kids can stay in touch with friends and family by texting, video-chatting, and gaming has been a lifesaver for many families. There's just a little problem: Who the heck are they talking *to*? And how do you make sure they stay safe? With reasonable oversight, meaningful conversations, and a few critical privacy settings, you can improve the odds that kids' convos will stay cool—and help them learn to protect themselves from potential risks. Below, we'll break down exactly whom kids can talk to on different platforms, what you can determine from a routine spot check of their devices, and settings you can use to limit their circle.



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Senior parenting editor, mom of one

### Quick take

- **Use privacy settings.** Your kid should make their online accounts private and enable all available restrictions that prevent total strangers from contacting them. Tell them not to respond to any contacts they don't recognize—even if it looks friendly.
- **Recognize red-flag feelings.** Sexting, cyberbullying, harassment—it can all crop up when kids chat. Encourage your kid to trust their gut if something makes them feel uncomfortable—and block and report anything inappropriate. Also, never move a chat off the original platform, with a few exceptions.

- **Protect your well-being.** If it's not fun, what's the point? While kids love connecting to friends online, too much of a good thing could have negative consequences. Help them develop the self-awareness it takes to shut down devices when that happens.

### **Basic phone texting**

**Who kids are talking to.** Texting is mostly limited to people kids know in real life, but anyone with your kid's number can call, text, and even video-chat with them.

**What a spot check reveals.** A lot (unless kids delete their call logs). Phones log every call and text and may add the sender to your kid's contact list automatically.

**What to watch out for.** Group texting is *huge* with kids who have their own devices. It also opens them up to being contactable by anyone on the chain—and some people may be strangers. Contacts can be hidden and texts can be deleted, so looking at your kid's phone may not show you everyone they're talking to. Also, watch out for spam bots—texts that look like they're from real people but are actually ads; if kids don't recognize the number, they shouldn't respond.

**Useful settings.** iPhones allow you to manage kids' contacts (go to Settings/Screen Time/Communication Limits). Both iPhones and Android phones allow you to restrict third-party apps from automatically adding all of your contacts, which helps kids keep their circle smaller.

### **Social media**

**Who kids are talking to.** Kids usually chat or send pics back and forth with only friends, as well as friends of friends, but they can pretty much chat with anyone they want. For example, on Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, unless kids enable privacy settings to prevent contact with strangers, they can direct-message (DM) anyone who follows them and anyone they follow. The platforms also make it super easy to extend your network by recommending new accounts to follow, allowing you to sync all your social media contacts, and offering QR codes that let you add people with your camera.

**What a spot check reveals.** You should be able to see all of your kids' contacts from their account profile page. On Instagram and TikTok, you can read chats by tapping on a contact name and viewing the history. You can also follow your kids on those platforms to see what they post publicly. But Snapchat automatically deletes chats and public posts (stories) after they're viewed.

**What to watch out for.** Cyberbullying, drama, and time spent are all hazards of social media chatting. Unwanted contact, such as predatory behavior or inappropriate requests, is a risk—and it can come from strangers or kids they know.

**Useful settings.** Most platforms offer privacy settings that allow kids to keep their accounts private, prevent contact from strangers, and limit comments. Some apps go further: Instagram offers an array of settings for kids to manage their circle of friends, and TikTok offers a small suite of parental controls, including the ability to disable direct messaging.

## Conversations with Common Sense

Join us for today's webinar, Building Skills in Young Kids. Ellen Galinsky, chief science officer at the Bezos Family Foundation, will share concrete ideas on how to use tantrums and social isolation anxiety as opportunities to build life skills in children. Check out our COVID-19 series to register for more upcoming talks. [Register today](#)

## Games

**Who kids are talking to.** Kids play with friends they know in real life, but competing against new people is a huge part of the fun. So most gamers have lots of casual online pals they've made just from playing certain games or playing on a certain platform, such as Steam or Roblox.

**What a spot check reveals.** It depends. In most games, you can see a list of your kids' contacts, and you might be able to read your kids' chats and private message history. But some game chat is done by voice—so you might be able to only hear what your kid is saying when they're gaming, which is possible if you keep their console or computer in a family room instead of a bedroom.

**What to watch out for.** Game chat—whether voice, video, or written—can run the gamut from edgy (with really graphic language) to cruel (including hate speech and homophobic slurs) to kind (since gamers can forge friendships through gaming). Game chat can be totally off topic, too. Be aware that not all game chat occurs on the platform kids play on. Some gamers prefer to use the chat app Discord to talk with their teammates, so you'll want to find out whether your kid uses it (it has the same visibility as other social media).

**Useful settings.** Games usually offer privacy settings that allow players to keep a tightly curated list of contacts. You'll want to go through the game settings to enable the protections you're comfortable with, from limiting all contact to just friends to moderated chat, which is available on some platforms.

## Keep the conversation going

If you've relaxed a bit about your kid meeting up with friends online, it's a good time to check in. Review your rules about who they can talk to on different platforms. Are you comfortable with text chat in Roblox but not OK with DMs in TikTok? You can ask what differences they've noticed between face-to-face interactions and online conversations. Will they keep up with the video chatting when they can finally see their friends again? What have they learned about themselves during this experience? Also: Don't forget to tune in to our new podcast Parent Trapped, available May 6 on iTunes and wherever you get your podcasts.

—Caroline

### On our radar

**Rapper Travis Scott slays on Fortnite.** In-game live events like Scott's record-setting concert kick the blues and connect the world in uncertain times. [Yes, there'll be more](#)

**Major Messenger Kids update.** Facebook now lets parents opt in to expanded, kid-controlled connections. [Get the deets](#)

**Parks and Rec reunion!** Tune in Thursday night for a special, timely episode featuring old faves and guest spots. [Proceeds go to Feeding America](#)

**Celebrate National Teacher Day.** Coming next Tuesday, this day is now more important than ever (since you know how much they really work). [Get appreciation ideas](#)

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