

## 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 a post, tap the plus sign and select what you want to share from your recent photos and videos. 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 kids 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.
- 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, tap the camera or scroll through your media, and swipe through the filters to add effects. Then select Send To to share your post on Instagram or Facebook, or with specific people or groups.

- **Instagram TV (IGTV).**

These are longer-form videos programmed by Instagram (i.e., they're not by your friends or followers). Kids can also create their own IGTV channels and broadcast themselves, sort of like on YouTube.

## How old should kids 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 kids under 13 to sign up. Common Sense rates Instagram for age 15 and up because of mature content, access to strangers, marketing ploys, and data collection.

## What kinds of content will my kid see on Instagram?

The kinds of content kids 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 kids 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 kid's activity on Instagram?**

You can ask your kid 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 kid.** 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 kids' friends online (but you should hold back on comments). If you're close with your kids' friends, you can follow each other and keep tabs on your kid's doings.
- **Ask for your kid'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 kid's feed.
- **Install a third-party monitoring app.** Parental controls such as Bark give you a lot of visibility into what kids are doing online. Learn more about parental controls.

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

Rinstas and finstas are additional Instagram accounts that are completely separate from each other. Finsta stands for "fake Instagram," and these accounts reflect a kid's true self and are only meant for very close friends to see. Rinsta is a kid'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 kid maintains more than one account, but don't be alarmed if your kid does. Instagram allows users to keep up to five accounts. 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 kids go through the natural process of figuring out their identities.

To see whether your kid has more than one account, you'll need access to their phone. Go to their profile page by tapping the person icon at the bottom of the screen. Then tap the username at the top of the screen. 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 kid's account names aren't too racy or revealing. Lots of kids include their ages, personal details, or even physical characteristics in their handles, but that can make them a target for predators as well as brands. Also, check to make sure your kid didn't create an account that's

meant for a business. You'll know if the account information contains a phone number and an email address.

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

Instagram accounts are public by default, so the first thing to do is make your kid's private. To do this, go to Settings from your profile page. Select 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 section -- and you should spend some time here if you're helping your kid set up their first account. You can't lock Privacy settings, though, so be aware that kids can change them back. A few more key Instagram privacy settings:

- **Comment controls.** You can limit comments to followers, block comments from specific people, hide "offensive" comments, and create specific filters for words and phrases.
- **Resharing to stories.** You can control whether or not other people can reshare 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 kid block or report other users on Instagram?**

Tap on the three dots next to the account name. You'll see options to report, mute, or unfollow that person. Another way to minimize interactions with someone is to use the Restrict option (in the Privacy settings) to screen someone's comments without them knowing. If a person is really determined, however, it's not hard for them to create a new account and start making contact with your kid under a different name.

Unfortunately, there are no easy fixes for some of Instagram's other bullying issues. The app tries to reduce potential problems by flagging comments that sound mean-spirited before they're posted -- which may make the person being aggressive think twice. But kids can still create "hate pages" that are designed to make fun of specific people or even imposter accounts that drag someone's reputation. You can report these types of accounts, but it can turn into a game of whack-a-mole -- and Instagram is notoriously unresponsive to reporting. Teach your kids when and how to use blocking and reporting (and make sure they know that they'll remain anonymous if they use any of Instagram's protective features). If you can't get rid of a bully, you may need more support from the school or other parents.

### **What are some other risks associated with kids using Instagram?**

Because Instagram is so image-based, kids who focus on external validation can get preoccupied with perfection, image, and status, which can negatively affect their well-

being. It's not uncommon for some users to curate their feed for public consumption by uploading only photos and videos that show them at their best and by deleting 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 kid 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 kid'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 kid using Instagram?**

Teens who use Instagram as a way to express themselves -- for example by posting art, poetry, and videos that showcase their talents -- tend to have positive experiences with the app. When used in balance with other activities and with purpose (not just endless, mindless scrolling), kids can come away from the app feeling connected and supported.

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.