

A Parent's Guide to Snapchat

Snapchat is all about fun and spontaneity. By default, the text, photos and videos you share delete automatically after being viewed by the recipient. Users love that they can share a moment that's digital footprint-free — they don't have to think about how their photos, videos or comments make them look to some unknown audience in the future. Snapchat is "in the moment" — not so much about taking pictures to look at later in life (though you can do that) but letting people experience them right now and then move on.

Top 5 Questions about Snapchat from Parents

1. Why do kids love Snapchat?

They love the spontaneity of it. It's been (rightfully) drummed into their heads for years that photos and videos you share are on the Web forever and are really hard to take back, so Snapchat's a relief in a lot of ways. It's playful and "in the moment" — a nice change from the self-presentation and reputation issues in social media services that display photos indefinitely. They don't have to worry about some invisible audience.

2. Does Snapchat have a minimum age?

Yes, the minimum age is 13, in compliance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)..

3. What are the risks in using Snapchat?

Though there's nothing inherently dangerous about Snapchat, it's often referred to as "the sexting app." There's no research showing that's true and plenty of anecdotal evidence that it isn't the focus for teens, but—like any media-sharing service—Snapchat can be used for sexting, harassment, etc. It can be particularly hurtful if that happens, because Snapchat is typically used among friends (or at least people who have each other's username or phone numbers).

4. Is it good that Snapchat photos and videos disappear in seconds?

Yes, because photos and videos aren't put on display, they're not "out there" forever, typically, so there isn't the self-presentation or reputation anxiety. The ephemeral aspect actually adds a degree of safety, as long as people don't have a false sense of security about it—because media can also be saved as screenshots or photographed with another phone and shared with or without the originator's knowledge. That can be good or bad—bad because a screen-captured image can embarrass the people in it, good because—if things do go wrong—it can be used for evidence against someone trying to hurt the people in it.

5. What's the best way to help kids stay safe in Snapchat?

As with all social media, respect toward self and others makes us safer. Whether the experience is positive or negative depends so much on how people use the app or service, whether or not they're really friends, and how they treat each other in Snapchat. Friends may kid around, but most kids treat their friends well. It just never hurts to have a conversation (never a lecture) with them about how they use Snapchat just to be sure.

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