

Social media and young people: Practical steps for parents

internet
matters.org

What you can do now to support young people on social media platforms



Features to watch out for and what to do

Social media is designed to keep users engaged. These are the features that can shape children's experiences online the most and what you can do about them.

Start here (highest priority)

Private messaging & group chats

The default: Most platforms allow anyone to send messages unless settings are changed. Some now restrict DMs for under 16s but this varies by platform.

Risk: Private spaces are harder to monitor and carry a higher risk of bullying or contact from strangers.



What to do:

- Restrict who can message your child
- Turn off the option to sync your contacts in the app
- Review group chats (not just individuals)



Platform-specific tips:



- **Instagram** – [limit DMs to friends](#)
- **Snapchat** – [choose “My Friends” only contact](#)
- **WhatsApp** – [control who can add your child to groups](#)

Talk about:



- “Do you feel comfortable in all your group chats?”
- “What would you do if something felt scary or uncomfortable?”

Location sharing & geotagging



The default: Many apps request location access and may share it publicly unless manually turned off.

Risk: Posts or apps can reveal a child’s real-time or frequent location.

What to do:



- **Turn off location services** for social apps
- Avoid tagging locations in real time
- **Review app permissions** together

Platform-specific tips:



- **Snapchat** – [enable Ghost Mode \(Snap Map\)](#)
- **Instagram** – [turn off story and location access](#)
- **Device settings** – limit location access to “while using app”

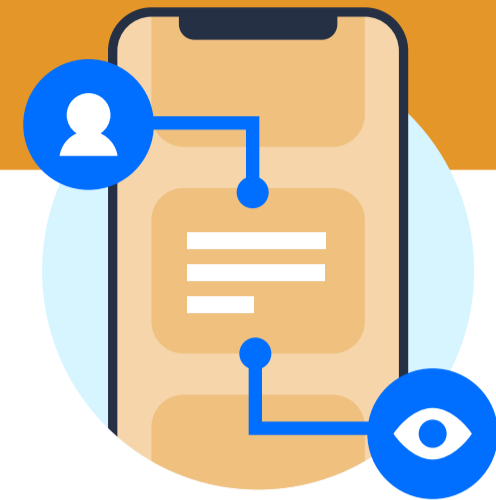
Talk about:



- “Who can see where you are?”
- “When is it safe to share your location?”
- “What could someone learn from your posts?”

Shape what children see & feel

Algorithm-driven feeds



The default: Feeds are personalised from the moment an account is created, learning from every scroll, pause and interaction.

Risk: Serves more of what keeps you scrolling, which can quickly lead to harmful or extreme content.

What to do:



- Use “not interested” **and** reset feed tools
- Turn off or **clear watch history** to reset recommendations
- Review feeds together to spot patterns

Platform-specific tips

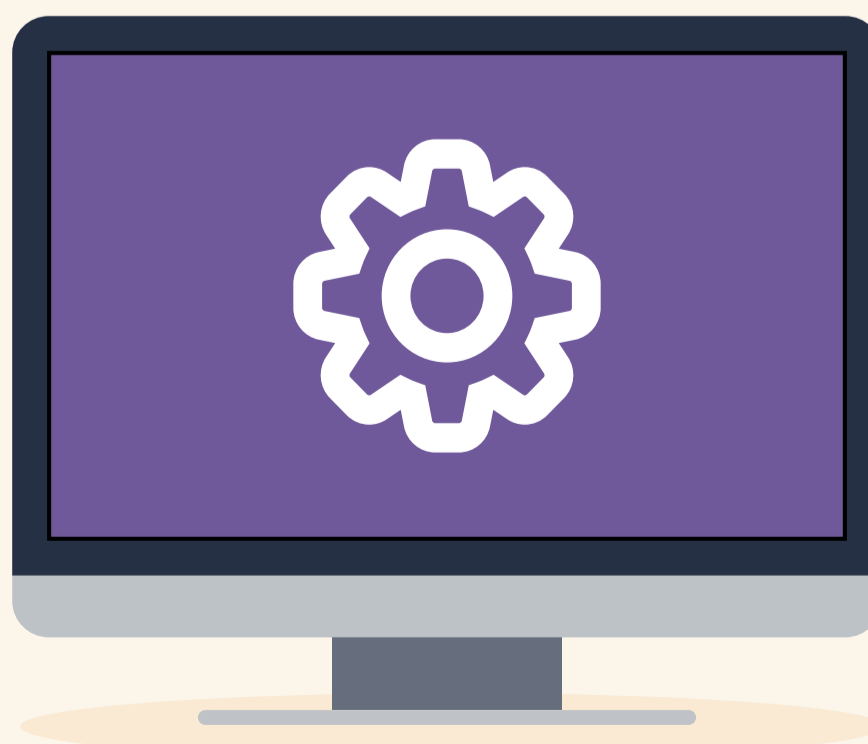


- **Instagram** – [reset content preferences](#)
- **TikTok** – [“refresh your feed”](#)
- **YouTube** – [clear watch & search history](#)

Talk about:



- “What’s showing up on your feed right now?”
- “Do you feel like you chose this or did the app choose it for you?”



Likes, metrics & public validation



The default: Most platforms display likes, views and follower counts publicly, though some now allow users to hide them.

Risk: Likes, views and follower counts can affect self-esteem and create pressure to perform or compare.

What to do:



- Turn off like counts where possible
- **Encourage creating, not just comparing**
- **Keep accounts private** and regularly review your teen's follower list and who is engaging with their content

Platform-specific tips:



- **Instagram** – [hide like counts](#)
- **TikTok** – [manage comment filters](#)

Talk about:



- “How do likes make you feel?”
- “Do numbers change what you choose to post?”
- “What matters more, likes or how you feel about it?”
- “Do you know how much editing goes into the posts you see?”



Quick wins to reduce overuse

Notifications & alerts



The default: Apps send a wide range of notifications by default, designed to bring users back as often as possible.

Risk: Push notifications are designed to pull users back into apps, interrupting focus, sleep and offline time.

What to do:



- Turn off **non-essential notifications** (likes, suggestions, trending alerts)
- Keep only what's needed (e.g. direct messages from known friends)
- Use **“Do Not Disturb”** or focus modes during homework and sleep
- Remove notifications from lock screens (to reduce temptation)

Platform-specific tips:



- **Instagram** – [manage notification categories \(likes, comments, reminders\)](#)
- **TikTok** – [turn off personalised & suggested notifications](#)
- **Snapchat** – [disable streak and friend activity alerts](#)
- **Device settings** – use Focus / Do Not Disturb modes

Talk about:



- “Which notifications actually matter to you?”
- “Do notifications ever make you pick up your phone without thinking?”
- “How do you feel when your phone keeps buzzing?”

Infinite scrolling, streaks & autoplay



The default: Many apps use endless feeds, autoplay and daily streaks to keep users engaged for longer.

Risk: Designed to remove natural stopping points, making it harder to switch off or manage screen time independently.

What to do:



- **Turn off autoplay** where possible
- Set screen time limits (device and in-app)
- **Agree on device-free times as a family** for example before bed or during meals

Platform-specific tips:



- **TikTok** – [use Screen Time Dashboard and sleep reminders](#)
- **Instagram** – [set daily limit reminders and manage notifications](#)
- **Snapchat** – [manage streak notifications and mute](#)

Talk about:



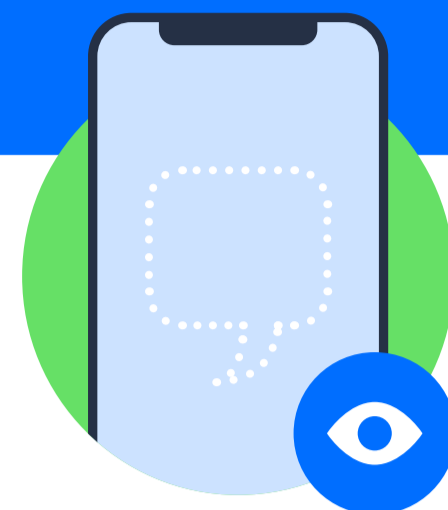
- “When does it feel hard to stop scrolling?”
- “What helps you switch off?”
- “Have you ever noticed scrolling affecting your sleep, mood or focus?”

▶ [Visit screen time tools](#)



Keep an eye on

Disappearing content



The Default: Some apps, such as Snapchat, are designed around disappearing content. Others, like WhatsApp, include disappearing messages as an optional feature.

Risk: Messages or images that vanish can encourage risk-taking or sharing things your child wouldn't normally.

What to do:



- Explain that nothing is truly private when shared online
- **Turn off auto-delete** where possible
- **Encourage pausing before sending** – if in doubt, don't
- Remind teens to **screenshot/report harmful messages** if needed

Platform-specific tips:

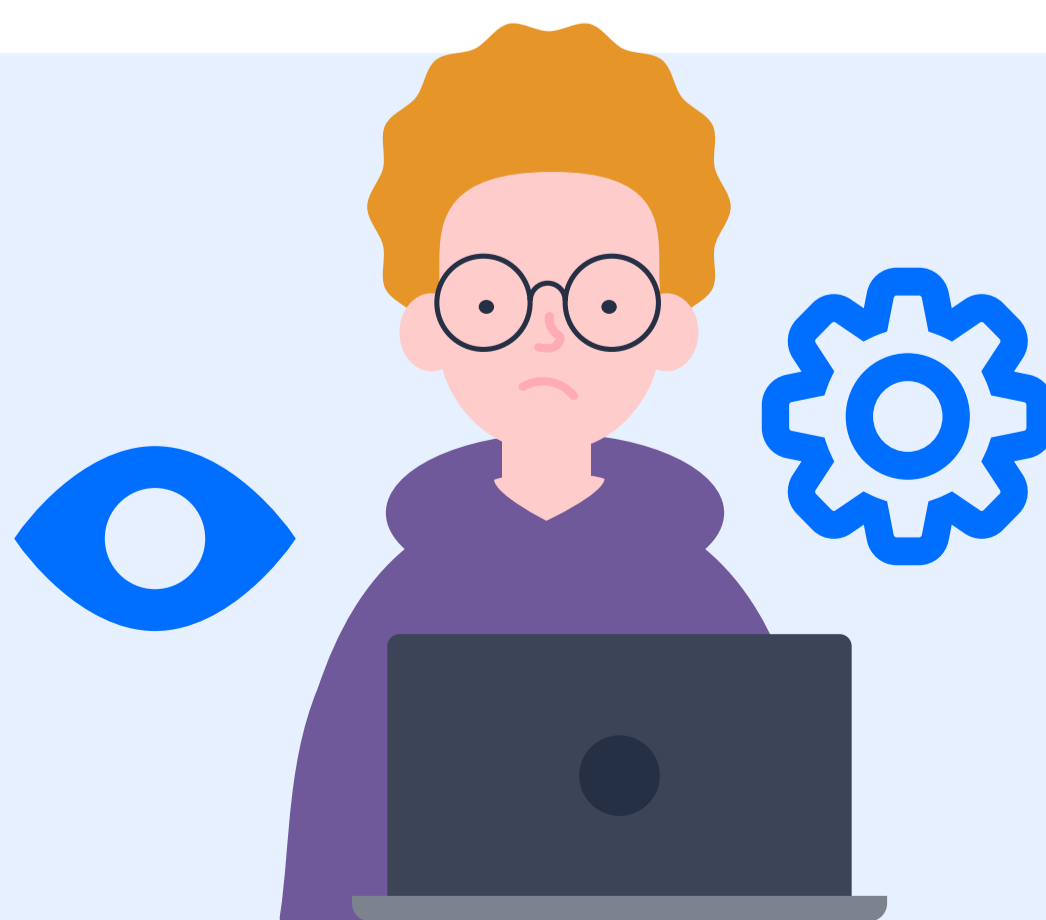


- **Snapchat** – [review chat deletion settings together and consider using '24 hours after viewing' settings instead of 'After viewing' option](#)
- **WhatsApp** – [check and turn off disappearing messages in chat settings](#)

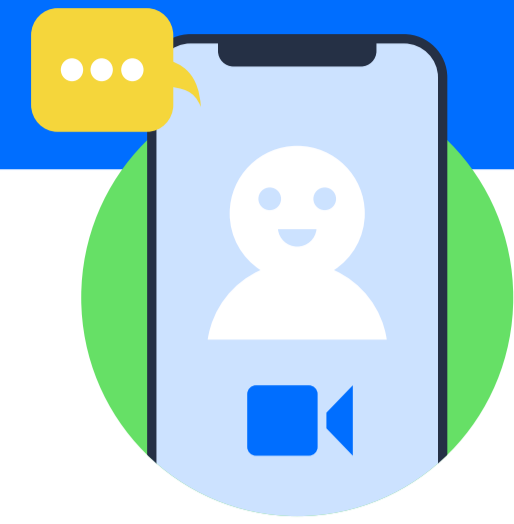
Talk about:



- “Would you be okay if this was saved or shared?”
- “Why do you think apps make messages disappear?”



Live streaming



The default: Most platforms restrict under 16s from going Live, but teens can still watch Live content in their feeds.

Risk: Live streams can be unpredictable and difficult to moderate in real time. Teens may be exposed to harmful content or unwanted contact from strangers through comments and interactions.

What to do:



- **Use your child's real age on accounts** for default protections
- **Limit viewers to friends only**
- Supervise use and check in regularly

Platform-specific tips:



- **TikTok** – [Use Family Pairing and content filters](#) to manage what appears in their feed
- **Instagram** – Use Family Centre to set time limits and [manage who can interact with your teen](#)

Talk about:



- “What kind of Lives do you watch and have you ever seen anything that made you feel uncomfortable?”
- “Do you ever comment or interact during Lives and do you know who can see those comments?”
- “Has anyone ever contacted you after you've interacted with a Live?”