A Parents' Guide to

Snapchat

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Top 5 Questions Parents Have About Snapchat

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 and videos 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 U.S. Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). But, when you download it, Snapchat asks for your date of birth, and – if your birthday indicates you're under 13 – you're redirected to the kid version, called "Snapkidz." Snapkidz users can't add friends or share anything, and the app doesn't send any information to the company. Instead, kids' photos and videos are saved just to their devices' "camera roll." But some kids know that means you can take a "Snap" and draw on it in Snapkidz, then share it with friends using *another* messaging tool, like a texting app, email, Facebook, etc. – or you can just delete Snapkidz and start over with a fictional birth date.

3. What are the risks in using Snapchat?

Though there's nothing inherently dangerous about Snapchat, early news coverage fairly predictably associated disappearing photos sent on phones with "sexting." Many assume Snapchat's biggest draw is the temporary nature of its messages, which encourages people to share racy images without worrying about the repercussions. But most people – including most teens -- don't use Snapchat that way. They use it because it's fun.

4. What's the appeal of having your messages disappear in seconds?

Because photos and videos go away and aren't on display anywhere, there isn't the reputation anxiety or image-curation fatigue people feel in other services. The ephemeral aspect also adds a degree of safety, as long as people don't have a false sense of security about it. Images can be saved as screenshots or captured with another phone and shared without the originator's knowledge. If your Snap gets captured by someone you send it to, Snapchat notifies you, but people have found workarounds for that too. So, as always with digital media, 100% safe sharing doesn't exist.

5. What's the best way to help kids stay safe on 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 on 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.

Snapchat, a media-sharing and chat app, is all about spontaneity. The text, photos and videos you send disappear seconds after they're viewed – you get to decide how long your friends have to view them. What users love about that is 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 somewhere out in the future. Snapchat users feel like they don't have to worry if they're having a bad hair day. However, as we'll show you below, there are ways to save what you share. So no one should develop a false sense of security.

Snapchat runs on Android phones and tablets and on the iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch, which are sometimes used by young children.

Snapchat's features

- **Media-sharing**. You can share both photos and videos on Snapchat, and both are called "Snaps." Each time you take a Snap, you choose how long the viewers you select can view it, from 1 to 10 seconds. For the most part, Snaps are about sharing a moment and aren't captured with a screenshot. When they are, Snapchat is set up to notify you, but people have found workarounds for that. So share with that in mind.

  "Stories," another feature that lets you string videos and photos together into, well, stories - stay available a little longer – 24 hours, in fact. Once you create a Snap, you have the option to start a Story with it. Then you can add more Snaps that help tell that Story.

- **One-on-one chat.** Swipe Snapchat's main camera screen to the right, and you can either search your Friends list for someone to chat with or swipe a friend's name to the right to get into a chat with that friend. Like photos and videos, chats generally disappear quickly too. Once both parties have left the chat, the messages are gone. However, a message can be saved by one of the chatters, and – when it is – it's saved on both of their screens.

- **Snapcash**. Snapchat's payment feature is not for users under 18, but parents will want to know about it so nobody "borrows" their debit card to pay someone back or receive money via Snapchat. Snapchat partnered with Square, Inc., to enable users to link their Snapchat and debit card accounts to be able to make "peer-to-peer" payments.

Sharing a moment

- *Be nice – it really helps.* Just as in physical settings, people generally react, interact and share things in a friendly way on Snapchat too. Among friends sharing – especially with photos on mobile devices – it's usually a lighthearted thing, sometimes even goofy. It's just a shared moment like always, only now it can also be shared from the other side of the planet.

- *Who to share with.* Snapchat was originally designed for sharing with friends in "real life" – or at least people in your phone Contacts. You decide who's best for

sharing particular Snaps and Stories. If you like to share moments that only close friends or relatives would "get," set your Privacy Settings to optimize Snapchat for that preference. The Stories feature can be used in a very different way. Some celebrities have built huge audiences for their Stories and use the feature to communicate with their fans. You could build a fan base that way too; the nice thing about Stories is that, in your Privacy Settings, you have an extra option of customizing who can see them.

- *Context is key.* A positive experience on Snapchat truly depends on the situation being Snapped and the relationship you have with the friends you're sharing with. So, as in all other relating in life, help your kids understand that there's safety in kindness.

Optimizing Snapchat for security and privacy

- *Manage your settings.* Snapchat's settings are really basic, but there are some settings that can help a lot: the "WHO CAN" ones. If you don't want just anybody sending you Snaps, make sure you're using the default setting to only accept incoming media from "My Friends." Here's how to be sure:

  Tap the ghost icon at the top of the camera screen to access your profile, then tap the gear icon in the upper-right corner to access the settings menu.

  By "Who Can Send me Snaps," be sure it says "My Friends" not "Everyone." That way, only people you've "added" (or friended) on Snapchat can send you a photo or video.

  For more help with this, visit
  https://support.snapchat.com/a/privacy-settings

- *Screen capture is possible*. Snapchat doesn't support saving the Snaps you receive, but smartphone operating systems do allow users to take screenshots – capture what's on the phone's screen and save it on your phone. It's also possible to take a picture of the screen with another camera. So it never hurts to remind kids *never to snap photos that are illegal, could get them in trouble now or in the future, or would be embarrassing* if seen by people like grandparents, future love interests or college admissions officers.

- *Don't screen-capture without permission.* Some people think of this as basic good manners – to record someone on the phone or capture an embarrassing moment without permission has always been considered rude, and the same is true on Snapchat. If someone shared a photo of you asleep in a car with your mouth hanging open, you probably would not be ok with that. Most teens probably already know that's the kind of behavior people want to avoid on Snapchat, but it doesn't hurt to ask them.

- *You'll be notified (most of the time)*. Snapchat lets you know your message has been opened and – usually – if it has been captured and saved by the recipient. We say "usually" because it doesn't work 100% of the time and there are

workarounds, including some “hacks” and the ability to take a picture of the screen with a camera, including a friend’s mobile phone camera.

- *Protect passwords:* Like all services, make sure you have a strong and unique password and, parents, please remind your kids not to share their passwords with anyone, even their best friends. If someone has their password, it’s possible for them to impersonate and embarrass them. For more on this, visit passwords.connectsafely.org.

- *Keeping it real:* Snapchat is a service designed for "real life" friends. It doesn’t enable people to browse for new "friends" like some services, but there are still ways to find people you don't know (such as finding their Snapchat username on other services and "adding" them to your Snapchat Friends list).

- *Sexting concerns:* Of course parents worry about sexting – kids sending nude or sexually explicit pictures of themselves on social media – but it’s not nearly as common as some media reports have suggested. In fact, research shows it’s pretty rare among younger teens. Still, sexting certainly can happen. Teens need to know what the implications of sexting are. For more on this, see sexting.connectsafely.org.

- *For photo-sharers under 13:* Snapkidz, the app's version for kids, doesn’t allow kids under 13 who sign up with their correct birth date to use the app to share images and doesn’t pass information to the company, but it does save images to their device’s camera roll, which means that it’s still possible for kids to share them via texting, email or a social networking app. Snapkidz is built into Snapchat and is activated if a user indicates that they are under 13 when they sign up.

What to do about harassment or unwanted Snaps

- *Block the user*. To block someone from sending you Snaps, go to your profile by tapping the ghost on the camera scree, then tap “My Contacts”, find the person’s name in the list and tap it to reveal a little gear icon to the right of the person's name. Tap the gear and a screen will pop up giving you the option to block or delete that user. For more information visit https://support.snapchat.com/a/block-friends.

- *Flag underage users:* If you are concerned about a person using Snapchat who is under 13, you can report the person at https://support.snapchat.com/ca/abuse-other.

- *Report abuse.* If a child receives inappropriate photos or someone's harassing him or her, contact Snapchat via safety@snapchat.com or by going to Snapchat.com and clicking on Support. In the unlikely event you encounter anything that appears to be illegal or dangerous, or if you have reason to believe someone is at risk of harm or self-harm, contact your local police or dial 911 (in the United States) immediately.

- *Delete the account:* If Snapchat isn't for you (or your kid), you can delete the account by going to https://accounts.snapchat.com/accounts/delete_account as long as you have the username and password. If you wish to delete the account and your child won't give you his or her password, you can submit a deletion request at www.snapchat.com/static_files/deletion_request.pdf.

Some closing thoughts for parents

Snapchat is one the most popular messaging apps that kids use but new apps are popping up all the time, and parents can't possibly be on top of all of them. That's why it's important for kids to develop critical thinking skills to help them stay safe in media and all aspects of their lives.

And speaking of critical thinking, there's no need to panic every time you hear a media report about something awful happening in social media. The reason the news media cover awful situations is because they're rare. How often do you see headlines about planes landing safely? We only hear about the ones that crash. Of course kids can get into trouble using Snapchat or any other service, but the same can be said for swimming pools. That's why we teach them how to swim.

As for our job as parents, it's important to keep the lines of communication with your kids as open as possible and work together to figure out what's appropriate for them, in terms of safety, privacy, reputation and time management. It generally just works better to talk with our kids about their favorite tools – with genuine interest, not fear – because they're more likely to come to you when they need help and you're much more likely to be kept in the loop about all the cool technology that they use and you get to learn about. One of the most important things to keep in mind is that kids' use of social media is very individual and largely a reflection of their and your values.