

# States are investigating TikTok: This is how parents can monitor what their kids do on social media



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Is your child safe on TikTok?

High profile incidents including the "slap a teacher" challenge and threats of school violence have left some parents with questions about the app.

Now, a coalition of at least eight state attorneys general are looking into whether using the social media app contributes to physical and mental health issues for teens and young adults and if the company has violated any consumer protection laws.

Child safety online is increasingly a bipartisan issue following the revelations from Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen that Facebook internal research found that some teens on Instagram felt worse about themselves after using the app.

“As children and teens already grapple with issues of anxiety, social pressure, and depression, we cannot allow social media to further harm their physical health and mental wellbeing,” Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey said in a statement. “State attorneys general have an imperative to protect young people and seek more information about how companies like TikTok are influencing their daily lives.”

TikTok spokesperson Ben Rathe said the company would provide information "on the many safety and privacy protections we have for teens."

"We care deeply about building an experience that helps to protect and support the well-being of our community, and appreciate that the state attorneys general are focusing on the safety of younger users," he said.

So what can parents do?

For starters, you want to know if your child is using an app such as TikTok. The short-form video app has a curated version for users under the age of 13 (new users must pass through an age gate to use the app). For those aged 13-15, TikTok defaults accounts to private and users must approve followers and allow comments.

But many kids who are younger do use the app.

"I think it's very important for parents to know when their kids are using the app, in particular younger kids," said Yalda Uhls, a professor of psychology and founding director of the Center for Scholars & Storytellers at UCLA. "At that age, they are too young to really understand the vastness and permanence of the Internet, and thus it is critical for parents to be involved if they let their child go on the app."

## **How can parents keep up with their kids' social media usage?**

Most parents didn't grow up with social media and two-thirds of them (66%) say parenting has gotten harder than it was 20 years ago, largely because of smartphones and social media, according to the Pew Research Center. Even though nearly three-fourths (73%) of those 50 to 64 say they use social media, platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok skew much younger, the center's research has found.

The good news: TikTok is easier to understand than messaging app Snapchat, which also lets you send customized video messages that disappear in 24 hours. The bad news: Parents may underestimate TikTok, which also lets you post videos edited to include music, text, and other special effects.

"Sometimes parents think it's harmless," Uhls said. But "it's very easy for young kids to use. Thus it has raised the stakes in terms of getting involved in your child's social media life long before they are really ready for these tools."

Parents can download the app themselves and try to learn a bit about how the platform works.

On Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, you choose to connect with another person or follow an account. Although you can follow an account on TikTok, it "is very different because you're just getting a feed of videos that the platform thinks you'd be interested in," said Andrew Selepak, a professor at the University of Florida and director of the graduate program specializing in social media. A young person is going to be served up different content than an adult, he said.

But tap on "Discover" and you can search for "challenges" or "music" to see what's currently trending on the app.

## **Tech can help you protect your child online**

If your child wants to get on TikTok, parents can start by sharing an account with them using the app's Family Pairing feature, suggests Common Sense Media's Parents' Ultimate Guide to TikTok. Parents can see what kids watch and post, but the guide notes that kids can create a different account with a different email address and phone number.

Also under Digital Wellbeing in the app's settings: screen time management and restricted content features.

Most devices also have parental controls, which let you set parameters or limits for how long a device or app can be used and restrict access to certain apps and to some content. Details about Apple's parental controls for screen time and content can be found on [Apple's website](#), while instructions for screen time and allowed apps on Android devices [can be found here](#).

For more options, consider [Bark](#), a leading app, which can be installed on a child's Android or iOS smartphone or device. Bark can be set up to monitor screen time, block or allow certain apps and send alerts to parents when their child has come across – or searched for – certain content (violence, sexual content, online predators, suicide, depression, anxiety).

"The app serves as your dashboard, where you can look at all of your different kids and all the different accounts, what you might need to connect with, who has alerts, what are the alerts and, what do you do?" said Titania Jordan, chief parent officer at Bark.

## **The best tactic is talking about social media**

Monitoring apps may work for awhile, but as children get older "it's almost a badge of honor for a tween (or) teen to get around" them, said Uhls, who is on Bark's advisory board.

Education about social media – parents and kids can learn together – and discussion about various platforms is important, she said.

The recent TikTok school safety event could offer an opportunity to show interest in and broach the subject with your kids. "Social media breeds anxiety in adults, and for some good reasons, but to maintain a window into our kids' online lives, we have to come from a place of curiosity rather than condemnation," said Christine Elgersma, senior editor of social media and learning resources at Common Sense Media.

Parents, caregivers and teachers should remember "that what we see as kids' onscreen lives they see as just their lives. There's no division," she said. Starting discussions about what is happening on social media should start early, because "kids can get more and more tight-lipped around parents as they get older, which is normal," Elgersma said.

A good approach: Be curious, ask what your child's friends are doing on social media, as a way of avoiding a direct question. "Playing up the 'dorky adult' angle and asking kids to school us on what's new or cool puts them in a position of power and being in-the-know, and we get some of the info we want," she said.

And remember, just because a child doesn't have a smartphone or the TikTok app doesn't mean they might not be exposed to what's on the app. TikTok videos can be shared on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, and through texting. "If your child rides the bus, if your child is around other kids that do have a smartphone, in the lunchroom, at recess, chances are one of them has it and they will see it. It's inevitable," Jordan said.

Parents, she said, "need to have those difficult, but very important conversations with them about school violence, cyberbullying, pornography, online predators and mental health. All of these things are just so much more in our children's faces than they were when we were kids. And we are their support system, we have to address it, we have to be there for them."

Some help may come from Congress, which has held hearings on social media recently. "It's great for a parent to sit and talk to their child about (the issues)," Selepak said. "It seems like it's up to the platforms to understand the dangers ... and (have content) removed to prevent impressionable underage kids from doing stupid things."

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<https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/new-features-for-teens-and-families-on-tiktok-us>

# New features for teens and families on TikTok

*By Cormac Keenan, Head of Trust and Safety, TikTok*

Today we're announcing new features for teens, families, and our broader community. We believe digital experiences should bring joy and play a positive role in how people express themselves, discover ideas, and connect. We're improving our screen time tool with more custom options, introducing new default settings for teen accounts, and expanding Family Pairing with more parental controls.

## **Changes to help teens manage their time on TikTok**

In the coming weeks, every account belonging to a user below age 18 will automatically be set to a 60-minute daily screen time limit. While there's no collectively-endorsed position on the 'right' amount of screen time or even the impact of screen time more broadly, we consulted the current academic research and experts from the [Digital Wellness Lab](#) at Boston Children's Hospital in choosing this limit. If the 60-minute limit is reached, teens will be prompted to enter a passcode in order to continue watching, requiring them to make an active decision to extend that time. For people in our under 13 experience, the daily screen time limit will also be set to 60 minutes, and a parent or guardian will need to set or enter an existing passcode to enable 30 minutes of additional watch time.

[Research](#) also shows that being more aware of how we spend our time can help us be more intentional about the decisions we make. So we're also prompting teens to set a daily screen time limit if they opt out of the 60-minute default and spend more than 100 minutes on TikTok in a day. This builds on a prompt we rolled out last year to encourage teens to enable screen time management; our tests found this helped increase the use of our screen time tools by 234%. In addition, we'll send every teen account a weekly inbox notification with a recap of their screen time.

These features add to our robust existing safety settings for teen accounts. For instance, those aged 13-15 have their accounts set to [private by default](#), enabling teens to make informed choices about what they choose to share, when, and with whom. Direct messaging is only available to those age 16 and older and to host a LIVE, community members must be at least 18.

### **Helping families have conversations about digital well-being**

When teens need support, parents or caregivers are often the first people they can turn to, making them one of our most important partners. As we continue to innovate on how we empower families, we're adding three new features to [Family Pairing](#):

- **Custom daily screen time limits:** Caregivers will be able to use Family Pairing to customize the daily screen time limit for their teen – including choosing different time limits depending on the day of the week – giving families more choices to match screen time to school schedules, holiday breaks, or family travel.
- **Screen time dashboard:** We're bringing our screen time dashboard to Family Pairing, which provides summaries of time on the app, the number of times TikTok was opened, and a breakdown of total time spent during the day and night. From our [recent research](#), we know screen time is one of the topics parents most frequently discuss with their teens, and we want to support caregivers with relevant information to help them guide their teens.
- **Mute notifications:** Notifications help us stay connected, but there are times when it's important to be uninterrupted. We're introducing a new setting that enables parents to set a schedule to mute notifications for their teen. Accounts aged 13-15 already do not receive push notifications from 9pm and accounts aged 16-17 have push notifications disabled from 10pm.

Every teen is different, and so is every family. That's why we remain focused on reaching parents with the information they need about TikTok. We do this through [partnerships with creators, industry experts, and advertising campaigns focused on safety features](#). In addition to in-app educational videos about Family Pairing featuring creators like [@team2moms](#) and [@handsonfamily](#), we continue to reach parents and families through national and local TV and digital campaigns that share tips and conversation starters for parents to initiate proactive conversations with their teens about online safety. We'll also continue to surface Family Pairing information to some of our users in-app to help them understand the options that may be useful to them or someone they

know. We hope these features will continue to help families establish an ongoing dialogue about safety and well-being in our digital world.

### **New screen time controls for everyone**

We want our community to feel in control of their TikTok experience. In addition to bringing these new features to Family Pairing, everyone will soon be able to set their own customized screen time limits for each day of the week and set a schedule to mute notifications. In addition, we're rolling out a sleep reminder to help people more easily plan when they want to be offline at night. People can set a time, and when it's reached, a pop-up will remind them it's time to log off.

We'll continue to invest in improving our current features as well as introducing new tools to help people stay in control as they express their creativity, make meaningful connections, and enjoy culture-defining entertainment.

*"Family Pairing is an opportunity for parents and teens to collaborate on developing healthy online habits. It's not parental control, it's parental involvement and an opportunity for parents and teens to learn from each other." - **ConnectSafely President & CEO Larry Magid***